Preferable to Whom? A Critique of David Benatar's Anti-Natalism

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I, Armand Steenkamp, declare that '**Preferable to Whom? A Critique of David Benatar's Anti-Natalism'** is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or assessment in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Abstract

Can we spare from harm those who will never exist? Well-known anti-natalist David Benatar believes that we can and that we should save future children from the harms of existence by choosing to never have them be brought into existence in the first place, arguing that non-existence is preferable. This discussion will ask: If existence is a harm and non-existence is preferable, then to whom is it preferable? My focus lies on this call-to-action Benatar brings to prospective parents through his anti-natalist position. Since his argument centres around the interests of the future possible individual, I argue that making any decision to deny their existence creates a paradox since we would act for the sake of someone who will, in virtue of that very action, never exist. This aligns with other contemporary objections made to Benatar's claims. However, many of them only go so far as to attack the nature of harm itself concerning those who do not yet exist. My discussion will address the solution Benatar presents to this charge. In doing so, I will display how his Basic Asymmetry between harms and benefits is amenable to the positions of critics, specifically concerning justifying procreation for the sake of those who would experience an absence of benefits they would have otherwise gained by existing. I argue that Benatar's dismissal of this objection on the grounds that it fails to constitute a deprivation for the person (and is irrelevant to their interests) is unsuccessful.

Keywords: Procreation • Anti-Natalism • Non-identity • Existence • David Benatar

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Introduction

In this paper, I critique the personalist account put forth by David Benatar in his *Better Never to Have Been* (2006). This account is utilized to justify the anti-natalist position that it is morally impermissible to bring someone into existence since doing so would be a harm to them. Procreative discussions of this kind have been popular in the realm of ethics and have a long history. Many proponents believe that it cannot be done due to prevalent issues such as the 'Non-Identity Problem' (hereafter NIP) put forth by Derek Parfit. These objections moved to disregard the personalist grounding on the future contingents themselves and opted for impersonalist views that make no reference to persons and rather how we could best ensure certain outcomes that would be good in general. Benatar rejects this. His famous argument for anti-natalism depends on the idea that existence is harmful overall to those who are born, and therefore we ought not to bring children into existence in order to spare them this harm. Benatar believes that we should embrace anti-natalism *for the sake of* those would-be children –these are children who, if we follow anti-natalism, will never exist. I will seek to answer the question: Can we justify a decision based on the interests of future contingents if that decision leads to them never existing? If we can justify acting in this way, to whom would it be preferable?

My first chapter will explicate the prevalent views of procreative choices and how they give rise to the NIP. I turn to the work of Derek Parfit in his *Reasons and Persons* (1984). In order to show how we might be able to understand the harms of life, my second chapter turns to Benatar's view that our lives are not good on average and are, in actuality, quite terrible. Born from this idea, Benatar begins his discussion on how we should not bring someone into existence to spare them from the harms of life. My third chapter delves into how this anti-natalist intuition is grounded in further common beliefs that the harms of existence are not matched by any possible benefits. This is the core of Benatar's 'Basic Asymmetry' between harms and benefits. Proposed as a personalist solution to the NIP, there are still lingering aspects that the personalist account might not solve. My fourth chapter deals with the presence of the NIP within Benatar's asymmetry and how critics object to Benatar's account based on this. After having shown how Benatar overcomes these issues, my fifth chapter presents my own critique of how Benatar's solution fails. His strength in utilizing hypothetical counterfactuals and defences based on the existence of a being to experience deprivation might overcome other issues opposed by critics, but I show how they expose a fundamental

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inconsistency in how the logic of Benatar's 'Basic Asymmetry' is applied in cases of absent harms and benefits. Finally, in chapter six, I consider how Benatar might amend his account in light of my charge and the implications for personalist considerations as a whole.

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1. A brief introduction to the Non-Identity issue.

Derek Parfit, in his *Reasons and Persons* (1984), provides us with an interesting case in which we question what our moral obligations are to future-existent people[1]. He stipulates an example where our choices would have an outcome on a future existent person, such as leaving broken glass in a forest that eventually harms a future child[2]. Parfit further develops this concern in the case of the 14-year-old prospective mother.

1.1) The 14 y/o mother.

> A 14-year-old girl chooses to have a child. Because she is so young, she gives her child a bad start in life. Though this will have bad effects throughout this child's life, his life will, predictably, be worth living. If this girl had waited for several years, she would have had a different child, to whom she would have given a better start in life[3].

We think that it is good to have a child later since the child born at T1 (when the mother is 14) would experience hardship. Notably, these intuitions seemingly track that we do this to benefit the child that would be born at T1. We can argue that if these circumstances were better, such as at some future time T2, then it would be better for the child that would be born. However, Parfit points out that the child at T1 is not the same as the child at T2. Parfit bases this on the biological nature of human conception. If we choose to have a child at one time, then certain cells are fertilised, and a baby is born. If we did not have a child at that specific time, then a different cell would be fertilised at the time of conception, which would have a different person be born. Since the cells are not the same between T1 and T2, Parfit argues that we cannot view the same person as being born at T2, who might have been born at T1 earlier[4]. This case leads Parfit to develop the issue he refers to as the 'Non-Identity problem'[5]. How would we be able to say that we benefit some child at T1 by choosing rather to conceive them at T2 when the subject born at T2 is not the same person?

The issue highlights problematic cases of justifying the moral acts an agent might take to spare future contingents from harm–when those same acts preclude the future contingent from

[1] See §16 of *Reasons and Persons,* Parfit (1984).
[2] Parfit (1984), 356-357.
[3] Parfit (1984), 358.
[4] Parfit (1984), 352.
[5] Parfit (1984), 359.

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coming into existence. This is best established in the examples presented by prospective life cases, but Parfit also shows how considerations of future contingents become problematic in policymaking and conservation efforts.

1.2) Depletion.

Suppose that we are world leaders in charge of developing socio-economic policies to curtail the effects of climate change. We can choose between two options: Conservation or Depletion of resources. We can conserve the resources that would be available to those in the future by changing how we utilise available materials. Otherwise, we can decide not to change the way we live now, which will eventually cause resources to become depleted and force future generations to find suitable alternative resources to those we presently use in abundance. Commonly, one might hold that we should opt for Conservation with the interests of future generations in mind. We would not want to actively harm the interests of those who come after us. The issue is that this case presents us with some troubling logic[6].

If we seek to make a decision now for future generations, then it must be the case that the people we seek to benefit presently are the same people who will benefit later (even though they do not exist at the time of the decision). With this, we mean that the subject of our consideration should remain the same in order to claim that the decision was made for this subject. This is a normal intuition that many might have in response to this case. Specifically, these intuitions rely on a personalist approach. This is a condition that Parfit believes poses a problem in the Depletion case. If we decide to change how we live by choosing a new policy, then the world would be altered in such a way that the people who would have been born would be different than if we did not make this change. This is similar to the case of the 14 y/o mother.

The Non-Identity issue arises when we want to act in a way that benefits some specific group of future people (the personalist intuition). However, if the actions we take affect the nature of who these people are, then we can only say that *some people* benefit. Not the *same* people. In the Depletion case, if we decide to change policies, then we are changing which future persons would exist to be harmed by our choices. How can we then make a decision in the interests of specific people if our act causes them never to exist?

[6] See Parfit (1984), 361.

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1.3) An Impersonalist solution.

In his hunt for a moral theory that could answer the NIP, Parfit explains that a key feature of moral considerations contains "person-affecting terms"[7]. Our intuitions regarding the welfare of others usually serve to describe that we are doing something for the good of *someone*. If I do not wish to harm an individual, it is not just some impersonal consideration of not wanting harm to be done, but more specifically, I do not want *this individual* to be harmed. Parfit continues that the use of such personalist considerations might describe that "an effect is bad if it is bad for people"[8]. He posits this idea during his discussion of a possible theory that would be able to overcome the issues personalist approaches face when relying on persons as subjects of consideration. Parfit believes that the personalist approach only clarifies the content of certain harmful acts. It would only show how some person, X, would be harmed by an act while another person, Y, might not. That itself does not justify *why* the act itself is harmful; it only explains how it applies to specific persons' cases. If we look at the 14 y/o girl and Depletion cases, we might argue that personalist considerations could be the origin of their NI (Non-Identity) issues. Our intuitions of the harms/benefits we might cause with our actions become muddled by considering these harms and benefits to be functions of specific persons and not judging the acts more directly in isolation.

Parfit suggests that the moral theory we seek should not be a personalist one or be built on a "person-affecting" format[9]. This alternate theory would be an *impersonalist* one, where harms and benefits are not considered *qua* functions of persons, and our considerations do not rely on facts that display how acts harm or benefit (particular) persons. Parfit formulated such a theory that

> when we consider the cases that raise the Non-Identity Problem, we should appeal to principles that are impersonal in the sense that they do not appeal to facts about what would affect particular people for better or worse.[10]

This is a more broadly appealing view that targets overall good or bad as the justification of our actions. On this view, it would be the case that Depletion or having a child born into harmful circumstances would exert a *net harm* in an overall sense. This impersonal conceptualisation

[7] Parfit (1984), 370.
[8] Parfit (1984), 371.
[9] Parfit (1984), 378.
[10] Parfit recounts this as his strategy in "Future People, the Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles" (Parfit, 2017; 123-124).

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does not require us to fix the idea of persons in problematic cases that necessitate the NIP. Comparing which act would be better, we look to the circumstances that are created by each decision. From an impersonalist viewpoint like the one described above, we would compare whether the lives of people are better or worse. This is not to reference whether every specific person who would ever live would be benefitted/harmed in their lives, but whether these outcomes are good/bad *simpliciter*. We can still keep the same intuitions we have for the two cases. The decision to have a child is bad since the child would not have a good life, objectively. Choosing Depletion is bad since it removes necessary resources that would lower the quality of life for those under it. However, the addition of *how* these situations affect either the girl's child or future people are not *why* they are bad; on the impersonalist approach, these states of affairs are bad in and of themselves (and that is, in turn, what makes them bad for people). We can reach the same conclusion that these acts are bad in and of themselves under impersonalist conceptualisations. We do not need to consider the impact on specific lives in order to justify that the act is bad. If we do, we are merely describing how this already bad/good act has an effect on them.

Parfit argues that we can account for our intuitions in the NI cases in impersonalist terms. We only need to compare the state of affairs our actions cause and whether they would be good or bad. This still tracks with our intuitions that the 14 y/o should not have a child now and that we should choose Conservation over Depletion but removes the need for person-affecting terms that lead to the NIP.

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1.4) The cost of Impersonalism.

Impersonalism, Parfit argues, dissolves the NIP. However, impersonalism might be hard to accept. The personalist intuition that, for instance, we should choose Conservation over Depletion *for the sake of* future people is a hard one to relinquish. Moreover, it can be hard to make sense of the idea that an action might be good or bad *impersonally*, independently of any agent. What does it mean to say that Conservation is a better course of action unless it is to say it is better-for-future-people? In short, Parfit's impersonalist solution to the NIP comes at a cost, and for this reason, few philosophers have been willing to take it up. In this section, I offer a quick overview of the reasons one might resist impersonalism.

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Impersonalism is most plausible in the context of Parfit's broader philosophy, in particular his reductionist view of personal identity and his amenability to Utilitarianism. This is amenable to his reductionist views of personal identity that he developed in his earlier chapters. The core idea he reaches is that

> On this Reductionist View, persons do exist. But they exist only in the way in which nations exist. Persons are not, as we mistakenly believe, fundamental. This view is in this sense more impersonal.[11]

We can see these effects at play in his conclusions. The reductionist view (that *persons* are not fundamental, separately existing entities[12]) would be compatible with his claim that impersonal considerations are the stronger case for understanding procreative duties. Persons would factor into moral decision-making merely to describe the element of cases (such as the persons in a hypothetical example), not as fundamental to them to justify actions we should take. We need not view something as *good for X*; rather, we justify an act as being good, independent of some person being benefitted by it. This is echoed by both the reductionist and impersonalist views.

Parfit believes that the reductionist view can more closely tie to our intuitions of personhood. He claims that for the reductionist

> people are not thoughts and acts. They are thinkers and agents. I am not a series of experiences, but the person who has these experiences. A Reductionist can admit that, in this sense, a person is what has experiences, or the subject of experiences. […] What a Reductionist denies is that the subject of experiences is a separately existing entity, distinct from a brain and body, and a series of physical and mental events.[13]

This is done by use of psychological connectedness and continuity across different instances, or what he refers to as "Relation R"[14]. The self and what we might think of as persons are not some special kind of thing but merely references of the relations we hold when trying to determine whether some person between two different points was *me* (such as determining agent responsibility). This easily flows into impersonalist considerations since we need not hold some specific *person* in mind as an entity over and above psychological connectedness. If we, like Parfit, take the radical view that persons are nothing over and above their psychological chains, then the impersonalist idea that an action might be good/bad independently of any person seems somewhat more plausible.

[11] Parfit (1984), 445.
[12] Parfit (1984), 445. See also his parts 1-3 for a full discussion.
[13] Parfit (1984), 223.
[14] Parfit (1984), 215.

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However, many do not share this view. Reductionism is a radical thesis that has been met with much criticism. Opponents of this view, like Christine Korsgaard and Marya Schectman, argue that reductionist accounts do not track our intuitions or provide effective support to govern moral considerations[15]. Others like Eric Olson describe the metaphysical claims that reductionists like Parfit employ are too hard to justify without extensive grounding[16]. The defenders of reductionism face a litany of issues to overcome, but even at a basic level, it does not track with our concepts of personhood. It is a strong and deeply held intuition that there is a 'me' and that I have experiences such that I am not reducible to the sum total of my experiences. Reductionism has all sorts of troubling implications, from assigning moral responsibility to agents to even the truth of the commonplace claim, "I was once a foetus"[17]. Parfit's impersonalist solution to the NIP might be made more plausible by his reductionism, but his reductionism is a cost few philosophers have been willing to shoulder. A second Parfitian device that makes his impersonalism more palatable is Parfit's amenability to Utilitarianism.

Impersonal considerations' troubling methodology.

In these impersonal considerations, we find that Parfit employs utilitarian tools to solve certain dilemmas. Utilitarianism considers an act to be good insofar as it provides the greatest net utility. Utilitarianism is well-known to be an 'agent-neutral' metaethic, and this again dovetails with Parfit's reductionist views about personal identity and, therefore, with his impersonalism. However, Utilitarianism is also well-known to be beset with serious problems.

The shared elements between Parfit's impersonalist approach and Utilitarianism have the unfortunate effect of all objections to the latter conceivably affecting the former. Objections such as those presented by the donor case or the idea that Utilitarianism would allow for choices that do not align with our common intuitions. In Judith Jarvis Thomson's "Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem" (1976), we are faced with the issue of a doctor who, under pro-utilitarian reasoning, would decide to harvest organs from a healthy man to save five dying individuals. This act would be rationalised as good since the lives of more people can be saved in comparison to losing one. However, we still feel that it is wrong to sacrifice one to save many.

[15] Korsgaard (1989); Schectman (1990).
[16] See Olson (2015).
[17] Troublesome since we would need to describe a foetus as *ourselves* even without it having a fully developed brain to sustain consciousness. Olson (1997) addresses this idea.

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Even Parfit recognises the severe problems with Utilitarianism. Though he appears at some times to align himself with the view, Parfit does contest some specific usages, such as act utilitarianism[18] and does not directly advocate for a utilitarian position. Parfit displays how this might lead us to a 'Repugnant conclusion':

> For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living.[19]

Parfit sees this conclusion as problematic. If we work on impersonal considerations, we might reach a conclusion like this where the varying relations of 'amounts of happiness or harm' are themselves deemed better or not but which have intuitively bad effects. Suppose I have two unhappy children, and I have the goal to have at least half of my children be happy. Instead of improving the lives of these two children, I would just conceive two more children who are happy. I do nothing to affect the lives of my current children, and it would intuitively seem bad to abandon them for the sake of this goal I set. This is similar to the ideas in the repugnant conclusion. This is an unfortunate effect that we open ourselves to with Utilitarian approaches. This follows the same charge against the impersonal nature of Utilitarianism, which values the overall more than the individual.

Parfit escapes the NIP by rejecting personalism. This moves him to consider more impersonalist means of dealing with moral choices. While he argues that these cases can also succeed in tracking our intuitions, he might run into the issues that other theories have that share common elements. Impersonalism is most plausible within the context of the rest of Parfit's philosophy, namely, his reductionist view of personal identity and his amenability to Utilitarianism. However, as I have shown in this section, there are good reasons to be suspicious of both reductionism and Utilitarianism and as such, we are left with little reason to embrace impersonalism. It does not seem as if impersonalist consideration is the necessary solution to governing procreative ethics, as Parfit believes it to be. If there is a personalist solution to the NIP forthcoming, it is preferable to Parfit's impersonalist solution, which comes at quite some cost.

[18] Parfit (1984), 389.
[19] Parfit (1984), 388.

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A better alternative.

Here, we can turn our eyes to David Benatar. Since we have seen that personalist theories can succeed but perhaps fail in other ways, we can present a case for such an approach that holds its own. I will show how Benatar argues for a personalist account that not only succeeds in the same way impersonalist ones do but also can overcome further challenges *better* than their alternatives.

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2. The Quality of Life

David Benatar, in his *Better Never to Have Been* (2006), wants to present us with a personalist account of understanding procreative duties. His account features the harms and benefits of existence and ultimately holds that we would harm anyone by bringing them into existence and, therefore, should refrain from doing so. A key component in his argument is the nature of harms and benefits and how they can be weighed to judge the quality of life. Subsequently, this informs our decision whether it is worth it to bring someone into existence if that existence would necessarily harm them. In most common cases, many would assume that not all lives are so terrible to necessitate our never existing. Benatar explains that this assessment we make of our own lives is biased due to psychological phenomena.[20] Benatar believes a clear distinction exists between the *actual* quality of our lives (some objectively verifiable reality) and our subjective assessments thereof, specifically in our justifications of such assessments. He claims that when we want to assess how good human life *in general* is, we must do it from an objective view.[21] Benatar aims to show that when we assess the quality of our lives, we tend to skew towards the positive. This is explained to be caused by three psychological phenomena: Pollyannaism, Adaptation and Comparison with others.

2.1) Assessments vs. reality.

The Pollyanna principle.

This principle refers to a tendency towards optimism. Benatar claims that our assessments of our past and future are biased since we could be subject to seeing things in an optimistic light[22]. This is described as having an exaggerated view of how good things are and how good they are going to be. Benatar calls on the findings of psychological studies to claim that self-assessment of our lives is markedly skewed towards the positive end of the spectrum. There is a special note that should be focused on:

> Most of the factors that plausibly improve the quality of a person's life do not commensurately influence self-assessments of that quality (where they influence them at all). For example, although there is a correlation between people's own rankings of their health and their subjective assessments of well-being, objective

[20] Benatar 2006, 64.
[21] Benatar 2006, 86.
[22] Benatar 2006, 64-65.

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> assessments of people's health, judging by physical symptoms, are not as good a predictor of peoples' subjective evaluations of their well-being.[23]

In this quote, Benatar is assuming a division between objective measures of quality of life (in this case, a person's health) and subjective assessment of said life. Elements that normally would denote a bad life (living with disease or in poverty) seemingly do not factor in the assessments people make of their lives. Benatar's claim is that since people would rather view their lives more positively, per Pollyannaism, they tend not to factor in these unhappy events as being proportionate to the good events. A further idea that embodies this principle is how we might adjust our assessments to fit a specific view rather than take their objectively (bad) meaning—through adaptation, accommodation, or habituation.

Adaptation, accommodation, or habituation.

Benatar reiterates his distinction with another reference to our *objective* well-being that can become disparate from our subjective assessment of our life's quality. He states that a change in our objective quality of life may cause subjective dissatisfaction. Subsequently, we tend to adapt to this new situation and adjust expectancies accordingly. Benatar explains that this adaptation or "subjective sense of well-being" is unreliable since it tracks recent changes in well-being rather than "actual" well-being[24].

I might have developed a rare disease at 21 that is incurable, and therefore, I view my life as pretty bad overall. Whilst another, who develops the disease at 80, would think that they have their family with them and a long life to look back on. They would assimilate the objectively bad aspect of their life (incurable disease) and think that their life is not that bad *on balance* – this is exactly the subjective assessment Benatar warns us against doing.

Implicit comparison with the well-being of others.

Benatar posits that self-assessments are often made by comparing our own lives to those of others. He relies on this to claim that our assessments only describe the quality of life comparatively rather than the 'actual' quality of life. He posits the corollary that since there are negative aspects of life that we all share, we tend to overlook them as being normal (in a comparative sense)[25]. As with adaptation, comparison also suffers from Pollyannaism, in which we form an optimistic baseline for judging our lives. Benatar attributes this to us wanting to

[23] Benatar 2006, 66.
[24] Benatar 2006, 66.
[25] Benatar 2006, 68.

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compare ourselves with those who are worse off to realise how good our lives are rather than more often comparing with those who have what we lack[26]. This makes us biased to prefer not thinking about the harms we face but rather being grateful that we are fortunate in comparison to others.

The three psychological principles form part of the claim that we are untrustworthy to judge the qualities of our lives if done from our own point of view (subjectively). However, Benatar wants to show that even with objective theories, assessing the quality of life will inevitably characterise it as bad. He is attempting to show this based on three theories: Hedonism, desire-fulfilment, and objective lists. These positions are taken from Derek Parfit and are seen as influential, common agreements on how we characterise the quality of lives.[27]

2.2) Theories for assessing the quality of life.

Benatar displays three theories to show that within all three, the conclusion is reached that life necessarily[28]contains harm. These three theories are Hedonism, Desire-fulfilment, and Objective list theories.

Hedonism

This theory characterises the quality of life by referring to the presence of certain mental states, or more broadly, pleasure and pain. Benatar distinguishes between positive, negative, and neutral states. Negative states are explained as depression, pain, discomfort, etc. Positive states are bifurcated. First, there is relief from negative mental states. Second, there are intrinsically positive states. These are described as pleasant sensory experiences as well as some non-sensory conscious states (he uses love, joy, and excitement as an example). Finally, Benatar describes neutral states. Neutral states include the absence of pain, fear, or shame (as distinct from gaining relief from these negative states).[29]

If we characterise lives on this theory, Benatar believes we find the same psychological principles (mentioned above) at work. Benatar asks us to realise how much of our lives contain

[26] Benatar 2006, 68.
[27] Benatar 2006, 69. For the original theories see Parfit 1984, 493-502.
[28] Here and further throughout the paper I refer to the conclusion that all lives necessarily contain harms according to Benatar. One might contest that he does not think a life, as a modal statement, necessitates harm. He states that *all* lives contain harm, but we can still hypothetically imagine a life without any bad in it (See Benatar 2006, 29). Through his later arguments and this chapter, I show that his conclusion is that all lives *actually* contain harms and these hypothetical cases do not bother him. I, therefore, continue with the use of 'necessitate' since his argument essentially states that all lives do contain harm and that if you are born you will most likely be harmed.
[29] Benatar 2006. 71.

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negative mental states that we barely acknowledge.[30] Suppose we look at hunger or fatigue. These are both negative states that all humans undergo in massive amounts every day. However, we do not characterise it as a daily onslaught of terrible events but rather just part of ordinary life. I eat when I get hungry, and I sleep when I am tired. We push through a workday to get home to eat and rest. We, ostensibly, do not give the appropriate respect to how often we endure negative states and do not let them factor into how good our days/lives actually are. On this theory, we would have to agree with Benatar that our lives are inherently bad.

Desire-fulfilment.

Benatar provides another theory of how we characterise the quality of life through the fulfilment of desires. He exemplifies this with positive mental states that occur when we mistakenly believe a desire has been fulfilled or when we discover that the desire does not coincide with the expected mental state. Benatar explains that in all cases, the theory requires us to assess the quality of life based on the fulfilment of desires and not merely the presence of mental states. He does this since we are unable to doubt whether we are experiencing a positive or negative state vs. the problematic nature of 'accurately' characterising the fulfilment of a desire.[31]

On the objection of how desire fulfilment as a process (i.e., in the time before a desire is fulfilled) can be positive, he states the following:

> I concede that some people do enjoy the process of fulfilling some desires. There surely are some writers, for example, who enjoy the process of writing a poem or a book, and some gardeners may enjoy the process of growing the desired vegetables. However, it is probably the case that Pollyannaism and the other psychological features cause more people either to think that they desire the process or not to mind having the desire unfulfilled during it.[32]

His eventual conclusion is to claim that the process of striving to desire things and the deprivation of this desire until it is fulfilled as being necessary is not to make a statement on the quality of life but rather to concede an unfortunate fact about our lives. He states that even those fulfilled desires do not grant any positive aspects to our lives. He uses the example of changing desires to suit your environment or, more accurately, to desires that are attainable/already attained. He does not believe this constitutes anything good. He claims we

[30] Benatar 2006, 72.
[31] Benatar 2006, 73-74.
[32] Benatar 2006, 78.

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might feel as if our lives have been made better by fulfilling these desires, but this is only to feel better about some situations and not have our lives actually be transformed.[33]

Objective list.

The objective list theories reiterate most of the concepts present in the former theories. They would have the attainment of pleasurable mental states and fulfilment of desires as part of the lists of 'objective goods' whereby we judge the quality of life with regards to their completion.[34] It is noteworthy that whatever can be attributed to being an objective good need not be conjoined by the presence of a pleasant mental state. The important aspect introduced with the objective list theory is the focus on the perspective from which these lists are constructed.

Benatar claims that

> just as our desires adapt to our circumstances and are formulated by comparing ourselves with others, so objective lists of life's goods are constructed in a way that makes it possible for at least some people to be said to flourish. That is to say, 'objective lists' of goods are not constructed *sub specie aeternitatis*—from a truly objective perspective. Instead, they are constructed *sub specie humanitatis*—from a human perspective.[35]

Benatar explains that this sense of 'objective' refers to variation not occurring between individuals and *vice versa* for subjective. Benatar claims that the 'objective' perspective of making objective lists is superior to assessments based on desires for the reason that desires may vary between persons. Benatar notes that it may be apt to construct lists based on subjective variance to assess the quality of life, but only comparatively. We can only know how good one person's life is when compared with another, but not a baseline of how good life *actually* is. There exists a disparity between reasons we establish for what is good from a subjective point of view (due to the psychological phenomena) and that which is good from an objective perspective. He claims that it is merely the case that when we want to assess how good human life in general is, we must do it from his *sub-specie aeternatis* or objective view.[36]

2.3) Objectively bad lives.

As I have shown, Benatar argues that due to psychological principles, we tend to ignore how much of our lives are characterised by negative mental states. He reiterates his point (pervasive

[33] Benatar 2006, 80.
[34] Benatar 2006, 81.
[35] Benatar 2006, 81; original italicized.
[36] Benatar 2006, 82-84.

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in all theories of judging lives) that we are so used to discomfort within our daily lives that we overlook pervasive negative states. Since everyone shares many of these states, we do not differentiate our life's quality from that of others based on them. Benatar claims the result is that normal discomforts are not correctly applied within our subjective assessment of well-being. He states: "That we do not think of how much of our daily lives are pervaded by the discomforts mentioned does not mean that our daily lives are not pervaded by them".[37]

One may claim that Benatar's supposition that we tend to skew our assessments of life and fail to reconcile them with reality is merely made to *explain* a phenomenon that occurs. The argument would then be that *since* harm exists, and our assessments do not reflect this, we could be doing so due to psychological tendencies to skew our assessments and therefore, our assessments are not viable. Many of these assessments are given in objection to Benatar's claims that all lives contain harm and are not worth starting. As Benatar shows, this is not easy to dispute. If we rely on our own judgments, as many do, we get it wrong due to the subjective nature of assessing our own lives. This would call on us to employ an objective metric. However, even then, we still see some psychological elements at play that unjustifiably skew the results to positive. This leaves us with the worrying conclusion that our lives truly are terrible and cannot be outweighed by the possible goods of existence.

2.4) Death, destroyer of interests.

If one still disagrees with how Benatar characterises harm, then it would be worthwhile to consider his thoughts on death. It may be the case that Benatar is wrong about the judgments we make about our own lives or that the harms he refers to might not be that bad. If this were true, then it would weaken his claim that lives are not worth starting since existence would be such a burden. However, there is one inescapable harm that all who exist must face. All men must die. Benatar provides a substantial discussion surrounding the nature of death in *The Human Predicament* (2017). I will briefly summarise his main ideas here.

The specific argument I will trace is Benatar's view that death *deprives* those who die. He posits this against the Hedonistic view[38] that relies on the subject needing to experience the harms related to death in order to be harmed by it (which they obviously do not; therefore, we could not claim death to be a harm in this view). Benatar believes that we can understand the harms of death without needing to rely on the firsthand experiences or sensations of those who

[37] Benatar 2006, 72.
[38] See Benatar 2017, 97.

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die, as the Hedonists would have us think. We would rather consider the interests of the individual that could have been or the good/bad that could have occurred in their life had they never died. Death is positioned as the annihilator of all these possible interests.[39] Benatar takes two routes in his exhibition of the harms of death. He discusses the view of balancing any net good or bad that could have been (similar to balancing the good against the bad explained in the previous sections of this chapter) and the nature of death being a harm independent of a specific life and its circumstances.

The former case of comparing the good and bad that could have been aligns with many of the same faults when judging one's own life. We may think that death deprives us of any possible good but might also save us from possible harms. Clearly, one might not think that a cancer patient with a terrible prognosis is harmed by their death since they would not have any further good occur in their lives anyway. We might also think that although the annihilation of interests is terrible, it might not be the worst fate that a person could endure. They might experience some greater harm from which they are spared by death. Benatar's response is not to take the hard line that these intuitions are false (although they are biased due to the psychological phenomena) but rather to highlight that in all cases, we still view death as a harm. Even though there might be some greater harm that one is spared from or no further good, it is still plausible that *some* good is annihilated by one's death on average.[40] We can all agree that no matter the balance between good and bad in one's life, death will *end* any possible good or harm that is to come. Death fully removes any possibility of continued existence (whatever it may hold), and this is significant enough to consider it as a harm.

This aspect does not stand alone. Benatar believes we can compound it with the idea that death can also be viewed as bad independent of its effect on a particular person (and their particular balance between good/bad in their life). He holds that even if annihilation would not be the worst fate, it is still true that there is a significant loss of the *self*.[41] A further strength is that this conclusion could be held independently by anyone, not just those who die. I do not need to die in order to recognise that the person who died suffered a loss of self. Benatar believes that beyond our specific interests in our lives concerning the good or bad we experience, in all those

[39] Benatar 2017, 101.
[40] Benatar 2017, 103.
[41] Benatar 2017, 104.

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cases, there is a thing that *can* experience them. When we die, this is lost. We can all agree that whatever else can be balanced, there is still a *loss* when we die, which is something to regret.[42]

Benatar does not hold this element to be integral to his greater argument. He states that those who disagree with his view could even remove the concept of death as a harm from consideration when dissecting the Asymmetry.[43] To be charitable, we must consider that his views on death were expanded in later work and not in his main text from 2006, which I focus on here. For the purpose of this discussion, I believe we can rely on the notion that, above all else, *something* is lost through death, and that is a harm to that person. Therefore, since all who exist must die, all who exist will experience at least *some* harm. Although I showed earlier that we often get it wrong when trying to balance these harms with any possible benefits, we might want to respond to Benatar that there is more to life than just harms. We could say that the benefits of existence could be a reason to make life worthwhile. In response, Benatar offers his asymmetry argument. I will discuss this in the next chapter.

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[42] Benatar 2017, 107;109.
[43] Benatar 2006, 29. I discuss this asymmetry in the next chapter.

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3. The Asymmetry between harms and benefits.

In my previous chapter, I show how Benatar argues that all lives contain either a substantial amount or at least *some* harm. This leads us to his conclusion that to bring someone into existence is to harm them necessarily[44]. This, in turn, informs Benatar's conclusion that the balance of benefits in a life does not outweigh the harms and that existence does not hold any benefit over non-existence[45]. Here, I will discuss Benatar's support for this conclusion with his 'Basic Asymmetry'. He explains that there is an asymmetrical character when comparing the presence of harms and benefits to the absence thereof. He provides four instances we commonly hold that display this asymmetrical nature. Benatar states that his construct, the Basic Asymmetry, best helps us to understand why we have these differing beliefs when harms/benefits are absent compared to their presence in our lives.

3.1) Asymmetries between harms and benefits.

Benatar explains that we can (uncontroversially) make the following statements:

1. The presence of pain is bad

2. The presence of pleasure is good.

However, this does not hold the same for the case of absence:

3. The absence of pain is good, independently of someone enjoying this absence.

4. The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.[46]

The latter cases (3,4) are asymmetrical and much more controversial than the former. To support these asymmetrical claims, Benatar provides four cases of other intuitive asymmetries[47]:

[44] Benatar 2006, 28.
[45] Benatar 2006, 30.
[46] Benatar 2006, 30.
[47] Benatar 2013, 123; Benatar 2006, 31-36.

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A. *The asymmetry of procreational duties:*

There is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, but no duty to bring happy people into being. [48]

The initial consideration is that if existence brings suffering, the absence of this suffering would be good, as seen in (3). To achieve this, we state that for someone who would live in harmful circumstances (such as existence), it would be good for them never to have been in this situation. We, therefore, have a duty to ensure they are not harmed by being brought into existence, as we are the ones who decide to conceive them in the first place. Contrarily, we do not hold that bringing someone into existence is a duty to be fulfilled citing their potential interests. We rarely ever hear people exhort others, "You should have kids! They would be such happy people!" whereas we do sometimes hear people wonder if they should have children when those children are almost certain to live regrettable lives. Thus, while there is some pressure to avoid harm in our ordinary moral practices, there is no symmetrical pressure to secure benefit. This supports the intuitive asymmetry between pleasure and pain Benatar claims to exist.

B. *The prospective beneficence asymmetry:*

It is strange to cite the reason for having a child as being done for that child's sake, but it is not strange to cite the potential child's interests in support of them never existing.[49]

Let us compare two cases: a child being born and harmed, and a child not yet born but not currently experiencing any pleasure. If I were to state that I wish to act in the child's interests, then we think it makes more sense to consider the child that will eventually exist due to my actions, *viz*., the child that is going to be harmed unless I decide not to bring them into existence rather than the one that will never exist. We do not feel that something is 'lost' for the currently-not-yet-existent child who is not experiencing pleasure. I do not take any pleasure away from this child if I do not bring them into existence since they would not have had it without existing first. We do not feel they are deprived of anything by not existing to experience pleasure. However, if we think of sparing a child from harm, then we would imagine that *should* they exist, then they would need to be saved from harms, which we could do by never conceiving

[48] Benatar 2006, 32.
[49] Benatar 2006, 34.

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them. Benatar argues that this intuitive asymmetry is tracked by the difference in harms and pleasures.

C. *The retrospective beneficence asymmetry:*

> Through retrospective judgment, we can regret bringing someone into existence for their sake. We cannot regret failing to bring someone into existence for their sake.[50]

Again, this builds on the first two beliefs. Suppose some person, Johnny, has cancer. I am sad about the fact that he is experiencing this harm; I wish he never had it – he would be better off never to be born to have had it. It is not the same character to state, "I wish I had a son, Johnny, who did not have cancer". It might seem plausible to state my reasons for this statement as wanting any possible children of mine never to have cancer (to track the latter element). It does not seem to be a similar case of justification with the notion of wanting a child, Johnny, who does not have cancer *since it would be bad for them*. I would rather just state that I wish to have a son and/or I do not wish any children of mine to have cancer. It does not follow to state that I want to bring Johnny into the world so that he can have the benefit of living a cancer-free life.

We can substitute the 'cancer-free life' with the idea of a life filled with pleasures. As Benatar tracks, it does seem strange to cite the interests of someone who will never experience pleasures if they never exist, thereby not being deprived of these pleasures should they never exist, as a reason for bringing them into existence. In cases where we would retrospectively state, "It would be better had this person never existed and experienced harm", then it seems appropriate to justify this consideration done *for the person's sake*. In the latter case of harm, the person would have had to be open to being harmed (i.e., exist). This is different from the deprivation in pleasure cases (where the person would not experience a deprivation of pleasures if we do not intervene by not bringing them into existence). Johnny, when he does not yet exist, is not harmed by cancer. It does seem strange to say, "I wish Johnny existed to experience a life without cancer" (i.e., some pleasure) when not having cancer is the reason given to bring him into existence. Johnny would not be harmed by cancer if he never existed, so even though living cancer-free is a benefit Johnny could receive if he existed, it does not follow to bring him into existence based on this. This is where Benatar shows the intuitive asymmetry at work.

[50] Benatar 2006, 34.

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D. The asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people:

We are sad about the distant suffering of others, but not about the possible people who could have been leading happy lives.[51]

Benatar presents us with two examples. The first is of inhabitants of a foreign land whose lives are characterised by suffering, and the second is of some uninhabited areas like a remote island or Mars. In the former case, we are sad for the people who experience these harms. For the latter, Benatar says we are not sad that there are no islanders or Martians who are living happy lives. He states that this is the case since we do not lament the failure of bringing happy beings into existence since the absence of these pleasures is not bad[52]. Building on the previous ideas in the other asymmetries, this absence is not bad since there is no one for whom it could be bad. Benatar suggests that the only way in which this 'badness' might occur is if we feel some impersonal sense of badness or regret that we do not bring happy people into existence or that no happy Martians exist. Importantly, this is not regret for *their* sakes (i.e., personalist), but more some remorse that we do not have children or our sadness occurring since we want happy people to exist as an ideal[53]. Benatar suggests that if we did find out that there are some Martians that exist and suffer, then we would feel bad for them. He explains that we would regret the suffering within their lives if they existed, and this supports the intuitive asymmetry due to these different intuitions we have between harms and benefits in this case.[54]

3.2) The Basic Asymmetry.

Benatar argues that we can understand the above intuitions towards future generations through his Basic Asymmetry. To understand this asymmetry, we must first understand Benatar's goal and core beliefs supporting it. Benatar seeks to show that coming into existence is always a harm and that to bring someone into existence is to harm them. Benatar predicates this idea on an asymmetrical evaluation when comparing the presence and absence of pleasures and harms. He uses this to establish a matrix of cases that guides us in comparing how non-existence would be preferable to someone. This Basic Asymmetry justifies his claim that existence holds no benefit over non-existence when comparing the presence/absence of harms/benefits.

[51] Benatar 2006, 35.
[52] Benatar 2006, 34-36.
[53] Benatar 2006, 35.
[54] Benatar 2006, 35.

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The crux of his claim rests on what he refers to as an asymmetry of pleasure and pain[55]. This matrix also aligns with the four beliefs stated in the previous section.

World A X exists	World 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)

Benatar asks us to compare (1) with (3), and (2) with (4). We are told that (3) is better than (1), but (2) is not better than (4). Benatar claims that the presence of pleasure is not preferred over its absence since the absence of pleasure is not itself bad[56]. Non-existence is preferable to existence, according to Benatar, since there is nothing *bad* about not coming into existence (3 and 4), but there *is* a harm in coming into existence (1 and 2) and the harms of existence are not countered by any overwhelming accompanying pleasures[57]. This leads to Benatar's claim that if some future contingent had never been born, they would not have been deprived of pleasure. We are ushered then to the conclusion that if a child had never been born, it would not be a bad thing due to some absence of possible pleasures (since there would be no one born for whom this absence is a deprivation). Therefore, Benatar argues, non-existence is preferable, and anti-natalism is thereby morally correct.

The claims taken from his matrix can all be supported by the four asymmetries. Benatar does not directly claim them all to be objective facts. He rather says that since we can account for these common intuitions in considering procreative choices, then this asymmetry and matrix is a good basis to start with since if we agree on these intuitions, as many do, then we are led to his conclusions with his asymmetry between pleasure and harm[58]. Many theorists have questioned Benatar's intuitions A-D, above,[59] and in so doing, have questioned whether his

[55] Benatar 2006, 38.
[56] Benatar 1997, 348.
[57] This forms part of Benatar's quality of life argument that I address in the previous chapter from page 14.
[58] Benatar 2006, 32.
[59] e.g. Harman 2009, DeGrazia 2010, Spurret 2013.

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Asymmetry argument is well-founded. This, however, is not the approach I will be taking in this project. I will not directly dispute any of Benatar's four asymmetrical intuitions as my main concern. Instead, I will later turn to question their underlying logic.

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4. The Non-Identity problem within Benatar's Asymmetry.

As presented in the first chapter, Parfit explains that for our considerations in procreative cases, we are led astray when using 'person-affecting' terms. We can understand his worry as any personalist approach to justifying procreative decisions runs into the Non-Identity problem. When we look at cases such as the 14 y/o girl, we are left with a paradox of trying to reconcile how we could act in the interest of someone if the act causes them never to exist. This is at odds with our common intuitions that we should not bring someone into a life filled with suffering since it would harm them. Parfit's solution is to search for an impersonalist theory that could still account for the intuitions we hold that to spare someone from a life of harm is a good thing[60]. Benatar believes his personalist account can succeed without needing to employ impersonalist considerations. In this chapter, I examine one prominent critique of Benatar's Asymmetry argument, namely that it succumbs to the Non-Identity Problem. I then examine the ways in which Benatar has tried to defend his position against this criticism. Finally, I will present my understanding of how Benatar employs what I refer to as the 'Hypothetical Proxy', which he believes saves him from the NIP.

4.1) Critics of the Basic Asymmetry.

In his Basic Asymmetry, Benatar compares two scenarios, A and B, where a person exists and does not in order to show that there is no benefit to coming into existence over non-existence. This is done by appealing to the fact that we would want to stop someone from being harmed, *viz.,* to ensure an absence of harms, as that would be good (framed in a personalist manner– 'good' *with reference to a person*). If existence leads to the presence of harms, then non-existence leading to its absence would be good. Nevertheless, if we follow Benatar's claim that this should be considered through the lens of a person, we would need to state that the non-existence of this person would be good *for them*. This idea seemingly contradicts itself.

Benatar argues that we can overcome this conceptual hurdle of trying to compare existence with non-existence where there would not be a person to consider in their non-existence. His Basic Asymmetry accounts for intuitive ideas regarding harms and benefits in procreative decisions, and he believes it can do so whilst remaining personalist. However, there are some

[60] See Chapter 1, pg. 6.

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that suggest that Benatar's asymmetry falls prey to the NIP. Here, we would be served with an objection from David DeGrazia.

Only those who exist can have interests.

Consider, for instance, Benatar's intuitive asymmetry, discussed in the preceding chapter (pg., 22), that "There is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, but no duty to bring happy people into being"[61]. According to Benatar, we have a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence *for their sake*[62]. David DeGrazia questions this in his "Is it wrong to impose the harms of human life?" (2010). DeGrazia states that we can easily understand the claim that bringing a child into a harmful existence can be lamented since we would have no difficulty in fixing the identity of the subject; it would be the existing child. However, he fails to see how we can move to the conclusion that we could justify never bringing someone into existence as a consideration before they are born and then supposing that an indeterminate, non-existing being is benefitted by this act[63]. He claims that "If no child is brought into existence, then there is no actual individual who can benefit from one's restraint"[64]. This is exactly the issue Parfit refers to and is another manifestation of the NIP. We cannot consider a non-existent person since, by definition, they do not exist. DeGrazia makes a further consideration:

> I am inclined to agree [with Benatar's claim that we cannot regret not bringing someone into existence for their own sake]. But rather than explaining this conjunction of claims in terms of a fundamental asymmetry between harm and benefit, I explain it by reference to the fact that in the former case there is a subject who can be harmed, whereas in the latter case there is no subject to be harmed. On the other hand, if the conjunction of claims is best understood in impersonal terms, then I see no reason to accept the present asymmetry.[65]

This is part of DeGrazia's claim that an absent subject presents an issue for procreative considerations, which Benatar believes his Asymmetry solves–in that we do not need a person to be benefitted by an act for us to consider that outcome as preferable for them. As DeGrazia mentions at the end of the quote, it can make sense to understand this idea without needing to reference a person being benefitted, i.e., in an impersonalist manner. However, this would contest Benatar's personalist idea that we cannot claim absent pleasures are not bad unless they

[61] Benatar 2013, 123.
[62] Benatar 2006, 32.
[63] DeGrazia 2010, 323.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.

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count as a deprivation. If true, this objection presents a weakness to Benatar's Asymmetry. Elizabeth Harman mounts a similar criticism.

Impersonally better or better for a person?

Elizabeth Harman, in her "Critical Study" (2009), objects to the nature of Benatar's justifications for his asymmetry. Harman seeks to show that Benatar is equivocating between impersonal justifications about what is good/bad vs. personalist ideas of something being good or bad with reference to a person's interests. We see this at play when considering absent harms and absent pleasures. Harman suggests we can read Benatar to claim that

> The presence of pain is bad (both for the one who experiences it, and also impersonally), and the absence of pain (in the absence of anyone who would have experienced the pain) is *impersonally good.*[66]

The claim that this goodness is justified impersonally can be supported by Benatar's statements regarding the asymmetry. Benatar claims that the absence of pain is good even though there would not be anyone to enjoy its absence. He specifically states that this would be good even if the only way to achieve this would be through the person never existing to experience these harms[67]. Harman tracks this idea as being impersonal. After all, there is no person in existence being referenced, only some notion of their interests. Harman claims that if Benatar wishes to prove that someone is harmed by being brought into existence, then he would need to specify that the absence of harm is good *for that person*. This would be impossible to do since there would be no person to consider, leading us into the NIP.

Harman continues that Benatar equivocates between im-/personalist ideals when considering the idea that absent pleasures are 'not bad' for the person unless they are a deprivation. In this case, Benatar does rely on a person to be existent (or that we would need them to be existent to counter him) for us to understand his claim. He states that the absence of pleasures that come with not having someone exist in order to be spared from harms is not bad since these pleasures would not exist in the first place. Remember, this is brought up when considering if it is preferable not to come into existence. Benatar addresses the objection that even if we spare those from harm, they would not exist to experience pleasure. However, according to Benatar, we are not taking any pleasure away from this hypothetical person. They would never exist in the first place (due to our decision to spare them from harm), so they do not miss out on what they were never going to have without existence. For Benatar, it matters that they would need

[66] Harman 2009, 780. Original italicised.
[67] Benatar 2006, 31.

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to have existed, and our actions would need to *deprive* them of the goods of existence for us to consider this action as bad. Harman explains that ordinarily, one would view the absence of pleasure as a bad thing. In this case, Benatar specifies that it is not bad, but note that this is understood as not bad *with reference to a person* (in this case, the nature of whether this person would have existed to be deprived or not). We can see that the 'not badness' of absent harms is justified in a personalist manner (being a consideration based on what is good or bad *for a person*). Harman takes issue with this disparity between the two justifications. The absence of harms being good (even without a person there to enjoy it) is argued for impersonally, according to her. Why, then, should it not also follow that we could make the impersonal argument to support absent pleasures as being bad? Further, if absent pleasures are bad only if they are a deprivation (understood through a personalist reference), why should we not grant the same considerations for the presence of harms being *impersonally worse* rather than a harm *done to someone*[68]? Harman supposes that if we can argue that it is impersonally good to avoid the presence of harms for a non-existent being (impersonalist since there is no existent being to have the act be good *for them*), who would have been harmed should they exist, it would also be true that it would be bad for a non-existent being, if were they never born, not to have the pleasures that would come with existence.[69] If we agree with Harman, then due to the equivocation between im-/personal goodness and badness, Benatar does not consistently apply the same justifications throughout his claims.

DeGrazia and Harman both capture the common intuition that there is something suspicious about the logic of the Asymmetry argument in a manner akin to Parfit's NIP. If anti-natalism means that no child will be born, how can we possibly claim that we ought not to have children to spare *those* children from the harm of existence? Benatar is, however, well aware of this criticism and has responded to it in various publications that have gradually developed a complex defence of his position. I describe that layered defence in the following section before I finally move to critique it.

[68] Harman 2009, 781.
[69] Harman 2009, 782.

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4.2) The 'Hypothetical Proxy', Benatar's solution to the NIP.

I begin by explaining how Benatar believes we consider the interests of individuals while they exist but also before they are conceived. Benatar initially posits this split in positions by stating that we should not conflate the ideas of "lives worth living" and "lives worth starting"[70]. We might look to the life of X, who currently exists, and see how terrible their life is. We could also imagine that since all existence is so terrible and leads to harms (on the Asymmetry and quality of life arguments) such that *should* anyone exist, they would also be harmed. Benatar attributes the 'present-life sense' and the 'future life sense' to these positions, respectively[71]. As one may infer, the former case considers the position of someone who already exists, while the latter deals with the preconception of the interests of a future person.

Consider a present-life case: Would my son, Johnny, be harmed if he were to develop cancer? The answer is, of course, yes. Benatar explains that usually, when presented with an issue of determining harm to an individual, we employ a comparative framework to visualise the difference between two states, the one being an individual experiencing harm (Johnny develops cancer) and the other an instance in which they are not (Johnny does not develop cancer). This seems evidently mundane for present-life cases, as we can easily trace what events might cause harm to be done to an individual and how they might have been benefitted from not experiencing it. Upon further inspection, we might begin to question whether it is equally simple for future life cases, i.e. cases in which the individual in question has not yet come into existence. After all, it is hard to compare the before-and-after of a person when the event in question is the conception of that person – which does not give us a clear 'before' state. If X does not exist at time T1 (before conception), how might we claim that T2 (existence) would have been worse for them?

Nevertheless, Benatar explains, this is to expect a comparison between two states of a person (existence and non-existence) in order to claim a harm was done, but this is not the only way to think about future-life cases. Benatar responds to this line of reasoning, which he believes to be commonplace, by reference to the ideas of Joel Feinberg in his "Wrongful Life and the Counterfactual Element in Harming" (1986). Feinberg frames the issue differently. He posits that when we consider harm being done to an individual, we need not consider two possible states of that person but rather two alternate *states of affairs* (which need not include that

[70] Benatar 2006, 22.
[71] Ibid.

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person).[72] Instead of considering X at T1 and T2, where ostensibly we would need X to exist in both, we can compare different/possible states of affairs surrounding X's interests. Benatar defends this idea with reference to how commonly one might say someone is 'at peace' or perhaps 'in a better place' after passing. It would follow, at least conceptually, to state that a terminal cancer patient in pain would be better off when they pass on since the harms of their illness would be absent. If we read this claim as comparing two states of a person, X, it makes little sense: 'X exists, and they are in pain' vs. 'X no longer exists and is no longer in pain' – where non-existence can never be any state of X and thus results in a paradox. However, of course claims like "He will be better off after he goes" are quite commonplace and *do* make sense; this, according to Benatar, is because they are not premised on the comparison of two states of a person (existence and non-existence), but are instead premised on a comparison of states of affairs, one in which X exists and their interests are frustrated (they are in pain), and another in which X does not exist and their interests (painlessness) are met.

Benatar believes this to be applicable not only to present-life cases but to future-life cases as well. He believes that we can make the decision at the pre-conception stage (without them needing to exist first in flesh-and-blood as with present-life cases) that it would be better for an individual not to come into existence since it would harm them. The important aspect to glean from this mechanism is that we are considering abstract notions of *interests* concerning a person. Therefore, the person need not exist when making claims about their interests. It is hard to imagine how someone who is non-existent could be *benefitted*, but it does seem plausible to consider their *interest* in a hypothetical manner by supposing what kind of life they might lead if they are born.

Personalist interests?

How do we make these judgements about "interests", and in what sense are they personalist? Here, we are served by what Feinberg calls a "proxy chooser"[73]. As I mentioned before, Feinberg's focus lies on cases in which an individual is already alive (present-life case), where we can see that they are being harmed by existence. We then make the claim that the absence of these harms would be to the benefit of the individual, i.e., it would be better for them had they never been born. Feinberg frames this as the capability for us to place ourselves in the

[72] Feinberg 1986, 158; Benatar also expounds this idea, Benatar 2006, 22.
[73] Feinberg 1986, 164.

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position of this individual and then consider whether our interests would be better served by never having existed. He argues that

> It would be my rational capacities, values, and principles mixed with his pain, impairment, and dim prospects. If such a composite person were possible, then he would prefer non-existence to his present condition.[74]

He does not claim that we should rely on this individual's subjective judgment of harms, but rather that we can look to 'our' (the individual's) lives as a proxy and see that *any rational agent* would deem existence a harm. He states we can also do this retroactively, such as when parents realise that bringing a child with some genetic defect into existence was not serving that child's interests[75]. This all aligns with Benatar's supposition of how we could consider these cases.

I give the name of 'Hypothetical Proxy' (hereafter HP) as Feinberg does to the mechanism that he and Benatar rely on to understand procreative choices. Benatar does diverge from Feinberg in that he wants us to make the same decisions for future-life cases (pre-conception) as Feinberg does for present-life cases (post-conception). With this minimal difference, I believe it is apt to refer to Benatar's method as the HP as well. As we saw with the quality-of-life arguments (pg. 14), subjective judgments of one's life do not hold up and are biased due to psychological factors. This leads us to the necessity of an objective frame of judging acts to harm an individual. On a grander scale, we would judge *sub-specie aeternitatis*[76] how the interests of a being could be influenced. This is the same as Feinberg's 'rationality'[77] requirement. To objectively judge the harms of a life is the same as to think what a 'rational' person might prefer, i.e., not influenced by their subjective biases but supported through objective reasoning. This is possible through the HP. We need not physically consider ourselves the same person as the individual we are concerned with but rather consider what kind of life they would lead if born. We can objectively judge, without the need to know what kind of life a future person might lead, that if they exist, they will be harmed (at least by death as the annihilator of their interests). If we seek to avoid this harm (for 'ourselves' through the HP-i.e., for the person we are concerned with), we can state that never to have been conceived is to avoid the harms of existence. If we seek to protect an individual from harm, then we must choose never to bring

[74] Feinberg 1986, 163.
[75] Feinberg 1986, 164.
[76] Benatar 2006, 81. This is to say from an objective point of view.
[77] Feinberg 1986, 164. He states: "The judgment, once more, is not that the infant would be better off dead, as if death were a possible condition for him to be in, but, rather, that the preference for death over impaired present condition would be, in a strong sense, rational if it were expressed by a party concerned not to promote the infant's future good so much as to bring to an end his present harm".

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them into existence. This works for present-life cases, where we state that this individual would have been better off (it would be preferable to them) never existing (concerning the harms to their interests necessitated by existence) and the same for those who are not yet existent. In the latter case, we can utilise the HP to imagine what kind of life one would lead, recognise it will be harmful, and then choose to spare oneself from it. Benatar attributes an atemporal element to the considerations we make to justify the HP as being able to make prospective judgments even though the individual in question does not yet exist or the harmful act has not yet occurred[78]. All that matters is that *when* a harmful act occurs if it is bad for someone, it will still be the case that it will be bad even though it has not happened yet or is not currently happening when we consider it.

This is explained through the post-mortem case of Beth[79] and how it would be true at all times (even before her birth) that death would be bad for her when it occurs, and since it will *definitely* occur should she exist, we do not need Beth to exist at the time in which we employ the HP to decide never to bring her into existence. Let us examine this case in detail.

Persistence of harms.

In his discussion on the harms of death, Benatar provides the following example: He asks us to imagine how some person, Beth, would be harmed by death[80]. As I have shown in Chapter 2 (pg., 14), death is a harm to all interests and is considered by Benatar to be inescapable to those who exist/will exist. Benatar highlights an interesting case that arises when we consider the interests of those who have passed. Normally, we make claims such as "They are in a better place" or "At least they are at peace now" after someone dies. These common utterances could be seen as irrational since we seem to be talking about the interests of people who are no longer here. As expected, Benatar has a response to this. He states that we need not rely on this 'existence requirement' that many believe is needed.[81]

This is his argument:

1. Death is a harm to Beth, which is bad for her (based on earlier convictions).

[78] Benatar 2017, 113. I will fully explain this element further in my critique.
[79] For full discussion see Benatar 2017, 114-117. I also address this in chapter 2.
[80] Benatar 2017, 113.
[81] This is in response to the Epicurean ideology that sees existence as necessary for conferring a benefit or harm. His specific response forms part of his discussion trying to determine whether the time at which an action (like death) is bad for a person would change the way we would consider the case as being harmful/beneficial. For further discussion see Benatar 2017, 116.

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2. The time at which this harm is bad for Beth is the time at which she dies and is dead thereafter.
3. This time period begins when Beth dies and continues even though Beth does not 'feel' the harm of death (since her consciousness is terminated).
4. Since Beth does not experience this harm, but we still consider it to be bad for her, the harm of death for Beth is not restricted *just* during the time when she dies and after (from 3).
5. We can then state that even when Beth is still alive, it will still be true that death is bad/will be bad for her during the period of her death (from 3 and 4).[82]

He depicts this visually as well:

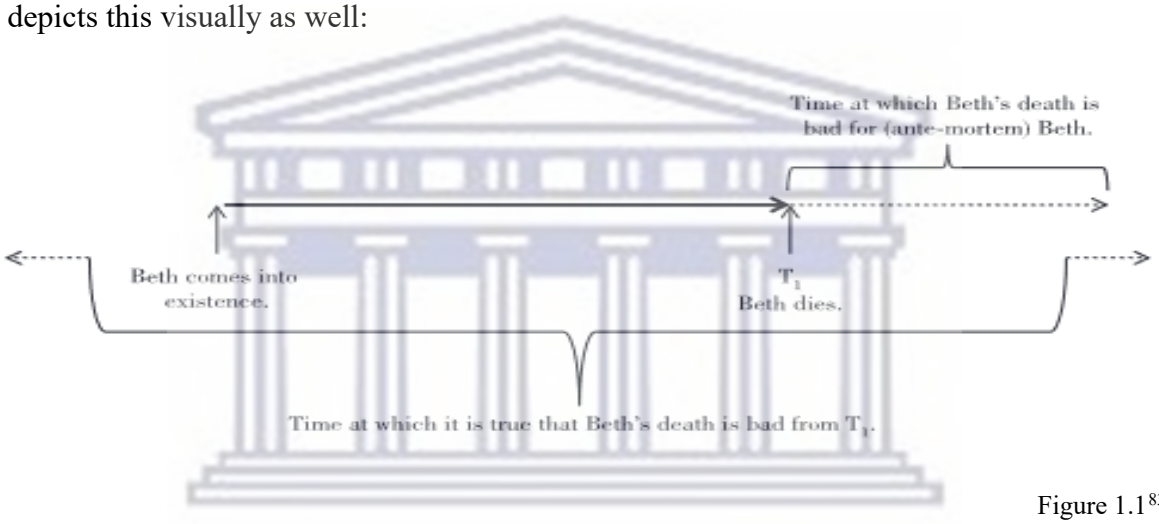

Figure 1.1[83]

Let us explore this idea. Suppose that we are some omnipotent being that can view all events that have/will occur at any point in time. We are able to view the time at which Beth comes into existence and the time at which she dies. If we agree with Benatar that death is a harm to Beth, then we can also agree that this harm as an act occurs at a certain time (T1 in Figure 1.1). However, it will still be true that just after Beth comes into existence, *should* she die, then that would be the period during which death is bad for her. Even though it has not happened yet, to claim that death *will be bad* for Beth does not differ from the claim that death is bad for her. There is a split between the time at which the actual event occurs and the time at which we could consider the effects the event had/will have when it does occur. If true, we can then state that at any point in time, it will be true that when Beth dies, it will be bad for her. We can compound this with the inevitability of death. Since Beth will eventually die, and that is the

[82] Benatar 2017, 116.
[83] Benatar 2017, 117.

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time at which she will experience the harms of death, it would follow that Beth will *eventually* be harmed.

If we draw together the ideas of personalised interests and the persistence of effects (like being harmful) that actions have (prior to–if it necessarily will occur, and beyond just the time that they occur), we can understand certain events as being detrimental to the interests of the individual we consider through the HP. We need not rely on the distinction that an act is bad since the person is 'worse off' because of it. We can rather state that due to a consideration of interests, we can determine that any rationally self-interested agent would deem some acts not occurring as being preferable over others. The subject need not actually exist since we can hypothetically reason what their life *would* be like if they existed and what they rationally would deem preferable. Since certain effects caused by actions would be rationally preferable to serve a person's interests, we can construe this as being a benefit to the person and *vice versa* for them being harmed.

Theorists like DeGrazia have questioned how it could make any sense to claim that we should not have a child in order to spare that child the harm of existence when the action entails that the beneficiary of the act will never ever exist. However, as I have explained in this section, Benatar is well aware of this (repeated) complaint and has a ready response: The apparent problem only arises when we attempt to compare two states of a person, existence and non-existence, when, instead, we should compare two states of affairs, one in which the child exists and one in which they do not. As an HP, we then ask which scenario better serves the child's ('our') interests. With this more thorough understanding of Benatar's position in mind, in the next section, I explain in detail how Benatar is successful in responding to those who have accused him of committing some version of the NIP.

4.3) NIP Avoided.

With the HP established, we can return to the objections to see how Benatar addresses them. The first concern was that Benatar needed to rely on an existent person in order to consider their interests. We can see that this need not be the case. With the HP, Benatar could reason what kind of life a person *would* lead if they were to exist and draw the conclusion that the harms of existence are not preferable to non-existence. Benatar does not rely on a person 'existing' in some non-existent state. He is not just considering a flesh-and-blood person, but a person's *interests*. He merely shows interests across a continuum where these interests as a concept still persist even when the person is not actively experiencing the harm or is not existent

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to experience the harm. It is still a harm (as seen in the enduring 'death is bad at all times' example of Beth).

Furthermore, Benatar is not making the impersonal claim Harman suggests he is.[84] Since the HP shows we can consider the interests of a person at times when they do not exist as a flesh-and-blood person (or when an event in question has not yet befallen them), Benatar can defend himself against the objection that he must be making an impersonal claim if there is no existent subject. He can account for the benefit of absent harms without needing an existent subject to benefit from them through the 'preferability' of the HP method. This helps us understand how his account can retain its personalist conceptualisation. Since Benatar describes personalist considerations as being considerations made with reference to a person and whether an act is good or bad *for somebody*[85], any considerations made with reference to their interests fit this description. Benatar notes that for problematic cases (such as those that give rise to the NIP), we expect an actual flesh and blood person to be benefitted in order to claim that something was good in a personalist manner. As I have shown, Benatar solves this issue with references to interests and rational preferences of someone considering these interests through the HP. Interests persist across all time in these cases where the 'person' does not. Beth does not need to be alive or dead yet in order for us to claim that *when* she will die/has died, it is a harm to her. Benatar presents us with a subject (i.e., the consideration of the effects of an action) that persists in procreative cases before and after an act is done. These considerations can be made without needing to have a person exist. The trick is that the subject is 'considering the interests of a person' and what would be rationally preferable for them. This, as his subject of concern, does make his account personalist (per his description), and it does so without succumbing to the pitfalls of the NIP.

[84] Harman believes that Benatar is arguing for absent harms *impersonally*. An approach she proposes Benatar should consistently be able to utilise for absent benefits as well. See Harman 2009, 780. As I show here, Benatar does not rely on these impersonalist elements.
[85] Benatar 2013, 125.

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5. Preferable to whom?

With all the important exposition out of the way, we now turn to evaluate Benatar's anti-natalist account. In this chapter, I will argue that Benatar's Asymmetry Argument depends on the inconsistent application of the HP and that if we apply the device of the HP across both cases of absent pains and absent pleasures, we may find that absent pleasures are not merely not-bad but maybe, symmetrically, bad. We begin by revisiting the Basic Asymmetry. In it, we will highlight where the asymmetrical gap lies in the reasoning Benatar employs for absent pleasures. We then move to how we might conceive of absent pleasures serving as justification for conception. We would augment how we could view absent pleasures as a deprivation when considering non-existent beings but through the HP and the Basic Asymmetry itself. Finally, we consider the problematic implications Benatar's account faces since it holds that we *can* justify the conception of someone for their own sake.

5.1) The Basic Asymmetry revisited

Benatar makes it clear within his diagram of his Basic Asymmetry that we are meant to compare existence with non-existence. We compare worlds where a person would exist with the ones where they would not and look to the presence or absence of harms to make judgments on what would be preferable for this person. In Benatar's example[86]

World A X exists	World 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)

We are asked to compare (1) with (3), and (2) with (4). We are told that (3) is better than (1), but (2) is not better than (4). To remind ourselves, Benatar is arguing that coming into existence

[86] Benatar 2006, 38.

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is not preferable over not coming into existence. However, to whom is it not preferable? I take that question here to ask where is the starting or current position to which we compare the alternative? Moreover, what are the properties of the person in this starting point? To put it simply, do we *start* with existence and compare the alternative non-existence or vice versa, and is this preferable to the existent or non-existent being? Let us rephrase this.

We compare

A. For a being that already exists:
-Coming into existence brought pain and harmed them.

-Had they not come into existence, it would have been preferable since they would not be harmed.

-If this existent person would have to make a decision, this existent person's interests would be served, and they would prefer not having this harm done to them–by never having been born.

B. For a person that does not exist.

-They are not harmed by being brought into existence; therefore, there is an absence of harms, which is good "when judged in terms of the interests of the person who would otherwise have existed"[87].

-They are also not harmed by not having existed to experience pleasure. Since they never have this pleasure to start with, it is not taken away from them. There is no person from which to take their pleasures. They are not deprived thereof, so this absence is 'not bad' for them.

Take note of the B case. To whom are these outcomes preferable? In the absence of harms, this act is judged in terms of the person *who would have otherwise existed*. We are benefitting an existent person but doing so at the time at which they have not yet been brought into existence. For absent pleasures, we do not consider it bad. Benatar states that it is only bad "where an absent pleasure is a deprivation"[88]. On this, Benatar states that

> absent pleasure is relatively (rather than intrinsically) bad. In other words, it is worse than the presence of pleasure. But that is because X exists in Scenario A. It would have been better had X had the pleasure of which he is deprived. Instead of

[87] Benatar 2006, 31.
[88] Benatar 2006, 41.

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> a pleasurable mental state, X has a neutral state. Absent pleasures in Scenario B, by contrast, are not neutral states of some person. They are no states of a person at all.[89]

We can argue from Benatar's claim that this person (X) at the time of consideration has no state and is not a person. Benatar wants us to consider *that* non-existent being as our subject and the one we should seek to benefit or harm when thinking of absent pleasures. However, does this have to be the case? Can we not judge absent pleasures in terms of the being *who would otherwise have existed* in the same way we do for absent harms? This is not to compare two different beings[90], but different points in the timeline of someone's (hypothetical or actual) existence and how certain acts affect their interests across all times.

Preferable to whom?

Benatar wants to prove that the harms of existence are a reason not to have a child. He shows this by comparing existence and non-existence. He circumvents the NIP's charge by framing it less as a comparison between two states of a flesh and blood individual but rather a hypothetical life that we consider through the HP. We can then state that something is 'rationally preferable' in service of the interests of the person we imagine ourselves to be through the HP. We can still question this claim: To *whom* would it be preferable to never come into existence? It could be preferable to an actual person since Benatar claims this is true in a "loose sense"[91]. There, I believe he is relying on a trick of combining a person's interests and the HP, that since it is preferable to *us* as that person through the HP, it would be preferable to *them*—i.e., it is preferable to 'this person who would exist'.

Normally, when questioning procreative cases such as the 14 y/o girl, we expect a flesh-and-blood-person to exist as our subject due to the lack of a person being there to benefit after a decision would be made in their interests (like the mother choosing not to have the child). Benatar responds to this by claiming that we do not need a person; we can use the HP and interests to understand this idea of a person being benefitted. He makes the claim that in a Wittgensteinian way, we need to change our language and no longer expect an *actual person* or at least expect a flesh and blood person (i.e., we should stop expecting there to *be* a person in a non-existent state in order to claim they are benefitted in non-existence)[92]. They do not need to be 'benefitted' for his preference argument to follow. I believe that the underlying

[89] Benatar 2006, 41.
[90] To avoid the NIP.
[91] Benatar 2006, 31.
[92] Benatar 2013, 126.

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success of this idea is due to whom we believe to be benefitted by our actions: an existent person, vs. a non-existent person. Obviously, it seems strange to consider a non-existent person to be benefitted since non-existence cannot be a state of someone[93]. However, it does seem plausible to state that non-existence is preferable to the person who would have otherwise existed.

To question to whom we would consider an act preferable would still be to expect a subject that we can consider (unlike a non-existent being that does not make sense to think of their interests in and of itself), but instead of doing this at the crossroads of persons and non-existence, we do it at the conceptual level of a person's interests. This makes us think that it is still a person being considered, even though they might not exist in every instance we examine under our consideration since we reference their interests. But specifically, we reference their interests *had they come into existence*. To understand this, let us re-examine the HP and how we might apply it.

5.2) The 'Hypothetical Proxy', in action.

Here we can return to the case of Beth (previously explained on pg. 35). As I explained, since Beth will eventually die, and that is the time at which she will experience the harms of death, it would follow that Beth will *eventually* be harmed, and we can consider this even before her death occurs. There is a key element at play in this example. The way this case is described by Benatar can give us insight into how his argument is constituted.[94]

Atemporalism.

An important element is the atemporal nature of how we should consider harm (and, subsequently, interests) in this case. This relates to the idea that we need not fix an exact time at which something is *bad for someone* to the time at which this individual experiences the harm. If we can conclude that death is bad for Beth, it will still be the case *before* the act that the act will be harmful to her *when it does occur*. What I seek to highlight here is that Benatar removes an experiential element from the case of harm. The time at which Beth experiences the harm does not necessitate the harmful nature of the act. It is based on the nature of the act itself being bad (death being bad due to the annihilation of interests, in this case). We do not

[93] Benatar 2006, 41.
[94] This element (and others outside my scope of consideration) is presented by Benatar elsewhere. He attempts to incorporate common insights on cases of the benefits and harms of death. I will not follow these distinctions as closely, but I do draw on them to assist in categorisation. For further discussion see Benatar 2017, 110-114.

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have to question how death can be bad for Beth if she no longer exists since it would have been true that when she does die, it will be bad for her. This is irrespective of her currently experiencing that harm (or even existing to be conferred the nature of an act against her as harmful) at the time at which we consider her case—which can be at any point along the timeline in the example. This is not to say that the time at which death is bad for Beth since it has occurred, after T1, continues *ad infinitum* and even before the event[95], but rather the persistent claim that *should death occur,* it would be true at all times that death would be bad for her.[96]

This example shows us how we can utilise an abstract concept like the interest of Beth (and how death is bad for her) as an enduring subject that does not fluctuate in the manner in which conclusions seeking only flesh-and-blood people as subjects do. This is the strategy that Benatar uses to solve the NIP. Since the content of our considerations are related to the interest of a person, they are personalist. Hence, we have a personalist account with an enduring subject across counterfactual considerations. For Beth, we are imagining either someone who, when they exist, will be harmed by death or someone who could already exist who will be harmed by death. No matter where in the timeline we place our observational point, it is possible to consider that abstract notion of the being's interest as our subject. The question I wish to pose is whether this also holds for cases in which Benatar says there is no subject to be deprived?

Deprivation understood through the 'Hypothetical Proxy'.

In his asymmetry of harms and benefits, Benatar claims that deprivation plays a pivotal role when comparing existence with non-existence. We can hold that the absence of harms is good even if it is good for no one, but the absence of pleasures is not bad unless it is a deprivation[97]. I suggest that in the same way in which we use the HP to show absent harms are bad for the person who would have existed, we can do so to find that absent pleasures are *bad as well* in the same (perhaps symmetrical) way. If the perspective point of hypothetical existence is sufficient to consider the benefits of avoiding the harms of existence, it holds that there must be some reason why we cannot do the same for possible pleasures.

[95] Benatar is not claiming that the time period at which death is bad for Beth (taken on an experiential account) is true before the event occurs. He is making a division between the belief that death being a harm to Beth is different from the period in which Beth experiences the harmful event. The difference lies in the event being bad for Beth (as the subject experiencing the harm) vs. the harm to her interests (taken as a more abstract concept and serving as the subject).
[96] Benatar 2017, 117.
[97] Benatar 2006, 40-41.

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Benatar does address this idea. He claims that

> One could (logically) make symmetrical claims about the absence of pleasure—that, when judged in terms of the (potential) interests of a person who does or does not exist, this absence of pleasure is bad. However, [the deprivation requirement] suggests that this symmetrical claim, although logically possible, is actually false.[98]

The defence he provides in support of this dismissal is to cite deprivation as a requirement for absent pleasures being bad. He calls to the intuitive notion that we do not strongly feel a duty to bring someone into existence for their own sake, citing absent pleasures. However, we can provide a case in which this intuition is different.

Existent, non-existing beings.

Suppose that we think of a being, John. John does not yet exist, and barring any intervention, he never will. He is merely a figment used for this example, not an actual flesh-and-blood being. That is until some omnipotent presence decides to show John, by some otherworldly mechanism, what his life would be like should he come into existence. John is then asked: "Do you wish to come into existence?". We would have to assume that John, acting like a rational agent in service of his interests, could state that he wishes to be brought into existence to experience the pleasures of life he would not have otherwise, for to be non-existent is to be deprived of them. In fact, if we grant for this example that we are only considering pleasures in our calculation, we would have to agree that John would prefer a life full of pleasures vs. non-existence. It might seem strange to think of John as a non-existent being who can think rationally, but this example is a one-to-one representation of the HP. If we replace the idea of ourselves as proxy with the being itself, through the mechanism of a rational agent that in some manner could decide the need for his own existence, it does not differ from how the HP works. What is different, I believe, is that now we feel more akin to state that there is someone being deprived of these absent pleasures they are asked to consider. This is precisely what I describe to already be at play with Benatar's HP. If considering a possible being, we must apply consistent logic between absent harms and pleasures. If we use the hypothetical being that would be deprived of harms as good, we must do the same for any being that could have had pleasures if existent as being deprived thereof in non-existence (taken from the perspective of

[98] Benatar 2006, 30. I denote 'the deprivation requirement' as the claim that absent pleasures are not a harm to someone to whom they are not a deprivation.

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the person who would have been born). This shows us how we can easily advocate for the birth of someone for their sake by citing their potential pleasures to be had.

This is a case in which the driving force is our intuitive agreement that we *can* think of a being that would be deprived of absent pleasures by never coming into existence. The being that would be deprived is the one who would have existed had they been born. However, we need not rely on intuition alone. I believe Benatar's Basic Asymmetry can also account for this case. It only requires us to apply the same logic for all cases consistently. We do this by not restricting ourselves to only one direction of comparison between existence and non-existence.

5.3) Directionality within the Basic Asymmetry.

There seems to be a fixed directionality present within Benatar's depiction of his Basic Asymmetry. We can start with an existent being (present-life case) and compare their non-existence to see that absent harms due to their non-existence would be preferable *to them*. The currently existing being we are considering would be benefitted by this (them never having been born). As I explain with the HP, the atemporal element allows us to take this idea that their existence would be bad had they existed, and we can justify this before they even come into existence (future-life case). Nevertheless, seemingly for Benatar, it still remains that we judge in terms of the person who would have existed. We still judge in terms of an existent being; we only do so from before their existence. I have shown how that argument is justified through the HP. However, there is a difference in Benatar's suggested approach to absent pleasures.

As shown at length, if absent pleasures do not constitute a deprivation, they are not bad for a person since there is *no one* for it to be bad for. This is integral to Benatar's account. However, it is only true that there is no person (thus, no deprivation) if we view it from the perspective of the person *who currently does not exist*. Benatar might say that they never will exist, but similarly to absent harms this does not stop us from judging their interests in terms of the person *who would have existed*. What if we consider that had some currently (currently meaning we fix our point of consideration to a time where they do not exist) non-existing being, Y, come into existence, they would experience pleasure? This is the route Benatar takes, but his consideration remains at the point where Y does not exist. Can we not similarly move this point to the Y that *does exist hypothetically* by utilising the HP? That Y, who would have come into existence at another time but currently only exists from our point of view through the HP, is experiencing pleasure. If they never come into existence, they *are* deprived of pleasures they already had (would have had). This is the atemporalist move that Benatar already relies on for

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absent harms. We only grant a consistent application thereof by claiming that the harm is not done to the non-existent Y (to whom absent pleasures are not a deprivation) but rather to the Y who would have otherwise existed. From the latter case of Y's perspective (and 'ours' through the HP), it would be preferable for them to have come into existence to experience pleasures and not be deprived of them.

Who is to blame?

We can use the aforementioned critique to state that Benatar's Basic Asymmetry has some issues. Benatar could contest that this does not hurt his case since he relies on the strength of his theory's efficacy in understanding intuitive claims. He agrees that we could logically claim absent pleasures as a harm, but this is to negate the fourth intuitive asymmetry, which he argues is a hard pill to swallow. He states

> Moreover, one would (actually) have to accept the implications of rejecting those views. Consider, for example, our asymmetrical view of distant suffering (which we regret) and absent happiness on uninhabited planets (which we do not regret). You can tell me that we should reject this asymmetry, but it is another thing actually to accept either of these views:
>
> a) We should not regret the suffering of distant people.
>
> b) We should regret the absent happiness of non-existent Martians.[99]

I believe he is relying too much on the notion that his fourth asymmetry is true. With the help of his HP, we could very clearly consider the absent happiness of non-existent Martians as bad. However, the stronger appeal from his defence is that we would not *really* feel a duty to ensure there are happy Martians. Similarly, we would not feel obliged to create children for their sake of having pleasure. However, it could be different since we justify this act as benefitting those *who would have existed* to experience benefits such as pleasure and that we owe it to them to not deprive them of this. As I explained in the previous section, it might just be that since the HP allows for such a case to be understood, Benatar needs to discard it. Alternatively, he could dig in and say that since we do not intuitively feel compelled by this duty to procreate for the sake of the future person's pleasure, it is indicative that this objection is without merit against his claim that we should not have children. I would object that the HP need not be the only target.

[99] Benatar 2022, 123.

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Instead, we can target the fourth intuitive asymmetry. Perhaps some could feel a duty to bring happy people into the world. As shown, they could cite the HP as justification. Benatar's deprivation defence does not adequately show that we should not treat pleasure and harms (specifically, their absences) symmetrically *when utilising the HP*. My suggestion would be that it is the HP at fault, not the nature of harms and pleasures. I agree with Benatar that the HP (more generally, his idea of considering the interests of being and stating what they rationally would prefer had they existed) could be the most apt method of justifying procreative considerations in a personalist manner. However, perhaps the issue is whether this is possible at all. Perhaps, to act for the sake of a future person in a personalist manner is to expect something intuitively impossible. That is why the intuitions Benatar believes to hold still might be true, but only when we clarify that we are *actually* acting in the interests of those that would exist in all cases. The asymmetry between harms and pleasures only exists because Benatar constricts the scope of whom to consider for absent pleasures unnecessarily. This is problematic for Benatar since his Asymmetry requires a difference–and subsequently, this restriction–between how we treat harms and pleasures in our justification for conceiving future beings.

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6. Conclusion

Benatar endeavoured to present a personalist account that could govern procreative decisions. Where we would normally have trouble understanding such cases, due to the NIP, Benatar's personalist solution of utilising a hypothetical proxy and targeting the *interests* of an individual solves the issue of expecting a flesh-and-blood being to be the recipient of any benefit. However, Benatar did not base his account solely on the success of the HP. His main argument turned on explaining a supposed asymmetrical difference between harms and benefits and how that would factor into our justifications for procreation. While aiming to concretise this asymmetry, it becomes muddled by ideas such as inconsistent application of the logic underpinning his account as a whole. However, I believe that Benatar could still salvage his account as an explanation of how we could understand intuitive responses to procreative cases.

I think the strength of Benatar's argument lies in the HP itself. Either Benatar needs to justify his Asymmetry differently, or he needs to accept that the HP does allow for bringing someone into existence for their sake. I do not think Benatar's account can accommodate the latter since it would weaken his anti-natalist movement. It would no longer be the case that there is *no* reason to bring someone into existence for their sake. The argument would then rely on determining whether the good of existence outweighs the bad. He would not be able to utilise his Asymmetry to declare the possible harms as more significant than the possible benefits, as he does in his text.

Regarding Benatar's discussion, the main focus would need to account for the fact that we can also reason through the HP that absent pleasures are bad. I will agree that there still is some suspicion whether we would feel *obligated* to have children merely for the fact that their absent pleasures would be a harm to them. What I claim here is not that we are obligated as such but that the deprivation defence does not align with the consistent application of the HP. To expect it to do so is an artefact Benatar must excise from his reasoning if he wishes to utilise the HP as it does serve an efficient way of understanding procreative decision-making.

If we held on to the HP, we would have a personalist account that *can* justify acts done for future contingents based on their interests. We need not resort to impersonalist tactics that come with their share of issues. Perhaps we might compound both accounts into one that utilises the

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expectation of some being, whomever they will be, and the considerations of their interests. I might reason that I wish my unborn children would all be rich (taken impersonally to be good) and thus create an estate for them, but this need not remain impersonal. I could reason *what it would be like* for that child when they were born as if they already are, i.e., to utilise the HP. I see no strong objection to why we cannot apply this to all procreative cases. With Benatar's case, it could still be argued that it would have been *good* never to have been, but the fuller discussion would lie between a more measured comparison between possible harms and benefits of existence to determine whether it is *better*, not one that disregards the strength of possible pleasures.

In conclusion, Benatar would need to rework his Asymmetry if he wants to retain its personalist nature since the personalist structure requires the HP to work and that itself defeats his Asymmetry. My critique does not aim to say all personalist accounts or all asymmetries are false, but that the ones Benatar utilises are not better off.

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