

Should We Commit Suicide?

The problem of death in David Benatar's Anti-Natalism

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1. Introduction

We normally believe life is good. For David Benatar, who has been advocating the significance of anti-natalism for over ten years, this *prima facie* evaluation is, however, unacceptable as it leads us to bring new people into existence without serious consideration. "Coming into existence is always a serious harm,"¹ said Benatar, who contends that harm in life is inevitable, and thus procreation is always morally impermissible.

As it is radically counter-intuitive, most philosophers have disregarded it or refused to consider the argument; however, it may be true that we cannot ultimately avoid suffering. If Benatar's argument falls under *reductio ad absurdum*, it would be understandable that there is no benefit in scrutinizing his demonstration; however, I shall argue that it does not. It is worth considering Benatar's anti-natalism because of the unpredictability of the human future, which presents the unavoidability of harm in human life. If Benatar is correct, we are unknowingly imposing harm on the future generations.

At this point, given that life can be too harmful to begin with, it is necessary to question whether carrying out suicide is recommended or not. In 2012, Rafe McGregor and Ema Sullivan-Bissett contended that if one accepts Benatar's arguments (i.e., the asymmetry of pleasure and pain and the poor quality of life), one ought to accept that suicide is preferable to continued existence because death is not a harm as claimed by the Epicurean line: "death is, in fact, nothing to us. It is because when we exist, death is not; and when death exists, no longer we are."² Therefore, they recommended a combination of anti-natalism and *pro*-mortalism, which is understood as the view that it is (mostly) rational to commit suicide. Nevertheless, Benatar does not altogether accept this view.

This paper therefore aims to illustrate the points at issue with this profound question of suicide by comparing the idea of Benatar and that of McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett about the harm of death. First, Benatar's primary argument is briefly outlined. Then, the modification by McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett will be presented. Third, Benatar's counter-argument that one's death is a harm, which involves the concept of annihilation, will

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

² Rafe McGregor and Ema Sullivan-Bissett, "Better No Longer to Be: The Harm of Continued Existence," *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol.31, No.1, (2012): 56. Quote: Epicurus, *Epicurus*, trans. Takashi, IDE, Chikatsugu, IWASAKI, (Iwanami Bunko, 1959), 67. Translated into English by the author.

be discussed. Finally, I shall argue that Benatar failed to preclude a possible combination of *non-anti-natalism* and *non-pro-mortalism* because of the ambivalence resulting from accepting variant conclusions about one's suicide being both good and bad, although he claims that death per se is a harm.

2. The asymmetry of pleasure and pain

The asymmetry of pleasure and pain has been one of the most controversial arguments to date. For Benatar, it is uncontroversial to say that (1) the presence of pain is bad, and that (2) the presence of pleasure is good. This symmetrical evaluation is, however, not directly applicable to the *absence* of pain and pleasure, for it strikes him as true that (3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas (4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.³ The asymmetrical evaluation is presented diagrammatically in the following figure.⁴

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of pain Bad	(3) Absence of pain Good
(2) Presence of pleasure Good	(4) Absence of pleasure Not Bad

Figure 1

Given that only existent, sentient beings perceive pain and pleasure, their presence corresponds to scenario A in which X exists; however, if that X never exists, then, he/she need not endure any pain, as shown in scenario B. This argument has been criticized by a number of analytic philosophers who argue that the value of absent pain should be null if there is no one to perceive it. They also argue that if we treat the counterfactual X as a person, then the value of absent pleasure should be negative so that we can preserve the symmetry, or these two states are not comparable in the first place (for it is unlikely that these two states could happen at the same time), and so forth.⁵ My concern in this paper is, however, not with the plausibility of the asymmetry, so I will not discuss this argument further.

3. The unreliability of our self-assessments

³ Benatar, 2006, 30.

⁴ Ibid., 38.

⁵ See David Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics," *The Journal of Ethics*, Vol.17, No.1/2, Special Issue, (2013), 121-151.

The presence of harm holds importance in Benatar's argument. In his latest book, *The Human Predicament*,⁶ Benatar enumerates and argues the common predicaments in humanity—meaninglessness, the poor quality of life, death, immortality, and suicide. He then concludes that any of these can be a good reason to stop further procreation.

This argument is, however, intensely counter-intuitive for those who are lucky enough to revel in life. No matter how difficult life is, some exceptions exist, and those lives can be used as strong examples to rebut Benatar's argument. Benatar claims, however, that their judgments about the quality of their lives are unreliable because such self-assessments are influenced by three psychological phenomena: an optimism bias (also known as Pollyannaism), adaptation, and comparison.⁷ To what extent people are biased by each phenomenon varies depending on the person, but Benatar asserts that "the vast body of evidence for these psychological characteristics of humans is simply undeniable."⁸ He also claims that "[e]ven if an overly optimistic subjective assessment makes one's life better than it would otherwise be, it does not follow that one's life is actually going as well as one thinks it is."⁹ However, this understanding remains controversial because if our psychological biases are already installed, there is no access to the real state of our lives in the first place. If this is the case, there is no reason to confront the real state of our lives because we are already happy and satisfied.

4. The problem of one's death

In reply to above issue, Benatar argues that all human life is, in fact, permeated by objective badness, namely, a tremendous amount of discomfort and potential harm, such as thirst, hunger, sleepiness, cerebral infarction, myocardial infarction, cancer, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), and so on. It is even worse, he declares, that the negative features of our lives are not limited to such unpleasant physical sensations; we encounter a wide range of negative emotions in life, as well. Thus, Benatar concludes as follows:

We are vulnerable to innumerable appalling fates. Although each fate does not befall every one of us, our very existence puts us at risk for these outcomes, and the cumulative risk of something horrific occurring to each one of us is simply enormous. *If we include death, [...], then the risk is in fact a certainty.*¹⁰

Even if you are doomed to die, however, as long as you are in good health and having a good life for the moment, it may still sound nonsensical to accept that coming into existence is always harmful because of the fact that we all die. In the terminal stage of an illness, given that you have an incurable condition and have been suffering from intense pain for a certain

⁶ David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁷ Ibid., 67-71. The outline is the same as Benatar 2006, whereas the latest one is more detailed.

⁸ Ibid., 70.

⁹ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁰ Ibid., 73. Italic added.

period of time, you may conclude that life is bad because you are then acutely aware of your impending death. This view is, however, not necessarily reliable because this is not the only way to die. Death can be a relief, too. Moreover, we are not able to balance past happiness against present pain, and there is the question of if we can actually experience death itself. If we take these ideas into consideration, it seems that this kind of argument is not always helpful when evaluating an entire life; rather, it tends to be an ad hoc decision depending on the situation.

Now, we have returned to a moderate view: one's life could be bad, but it is not so serious in life's earlier stages; death could be a serious harm, but it is uncertain whether we are going to experience it. Based on these ideas, it is still questionable if we can logically conclude that procreation is always acceptable; however, it strikes me as true that there is no imminent risk to prevent procreation either.

5. Pro-mortalism

It seems that the only way in which Benatar could maintain his argument is to demonstrate the harm of death itself. Curiously enough, if Benatar could not convince us that death *per se* is a bad, we have at least two ways to reinterpret his argument. One way involves non-anti-natalism and non-pro-mortalism. The other involves a combination of anti-natalism and pro-mortalism, which was proposed by McGregor and Ema Sullivan-Bissett in 2012. They contended that if one accepts Benatar's arguments (all human life is permeated by badness), one ought to accept that suicide is preferable to continued existence because death is not a harm as claimed by the Epicurean line: "Death is, in fact, nothing to us. It is because when we exist, death is not; and when death exists, no longer we are."¹¹ If this is true, there will be no reason to prevent us from carrying out suicide because death is nothing, but continuing to exist will (or may) accumulate the amount of harm in one's life. This view is called (the combination of) anti-natalism and *pro*-mortalism, and they consider it a more rational and consistent argument than Benatar's. Let us confirm their arguments about the Epicurean line using the following three points.

(a) Counter-intuitiveness objection

Benatar first claimed that the Epicurean line was more counter-intuitive than his own. That is to say, we do not normally accept the Epicurean line because, for example, it is implausible to say that murder does no harm to victim; also, we can expect that people frown more on the claim that murder does not harm the victim than the claim that coming into existence is always a harm; thus, the Epicurean line is wrong. According to McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett, however, this objection is unsatisfactory for two reasons.¹²

First, Benatar himself had previously insisted that "[...] a view's counter-intuitiveness cannot by itself constitute a decisive consideration against it. This is

¹¹ Epicurus, *Epicurus*, trans. Takashi, IDE, Chikatsugu, IWASAKI, (Iwanami Bunko, 1959), 67. Translated into English by the author.

¹² McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett, 2012, 59-61.

because institutions are often profoundly unreliable—a product of mere prejudice.”¹³ Thus, if he succeeds in countering the counter-intuitiveness objection against his argument using only this explanation, the same will then be applied to his rejection of the Epicurean line; therefore, the argument about the harm of death is still required.

Second, our intuitive reasoning about death (or the victim’s harm) is also based on a psychologically slippery slope, according to David B Suits:

[I]f mild damage is a mild harm, then death must be the greatest harms. Our strong pretheoretic conviction that death is a harm is a product of our usual way of thinking of things. But our common experience does not include our death. [...] it [death] cannot be a harm or loss for one who died.”¹⁴

This suggests that our intuitive reasoning is also influenced by a psychological phenomenon; however, such (experienced) knowledge does not have any relevant experience of death in the first place. Thus, our intuition that death is a harm is unreliable and, therefore, cannot be grounds for the assumption that death is a harm.

(b) Precautionary principle

The second objection by Benatar is on the precautionary principle:

If Epicurean is wrong, then people’s acting on the Epicurean argument (by killing others or themselves) would seriously harm those who were killed. On the contrary, people’s acting on my view (by having failed to procreate) would not harm those who were not brought into existence.¹⁵

McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett argue that his assumption that “coming into existence is always a serious harm” is mistaken because Benatar establishes that claim from the four premises, which create the asymmetry. However, if his fourth premise that “the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation” is mistaken, then it could be true that stopping procreation is bad. If this is the case, something bad would have been done by acting on Benatar’s view. Therefore, his second objection is also unsatisfactory.¹⁶

(c) The value of death

The third point Benatar makes is that one cannot derive pro-mortalism from the asymmetry, even if the Epicurean line is correct. Since death is nothing to us, the state of being dead has no value in itself; therefore, death is not bad, but it is not good either. For this

¹³ Benatar, 2006, 203.

¹⁴ David B Suits, “Why Death Is Not Bad for the One Who Died,” *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol.38, No.1, (2001), 81.

¹⁵ Benatar, 2006, 214-5.

¹⁶ McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett, 2012, 61-62.

reason, Benatar claims that “the view that coming into existence is a harm does not *entail* the view that ceasing to exist is better than continuing to exist. One can maintain that both are harms.”¹⁷

According to McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett, however, this assumption seems odd. Their example, which involves a character named John, is unclear, so I have arranged it as follows: suppose that John is about to be tortured in awful ways, but luckily (or unluckily) John secretly has a gun in his pocket. Then, one might think that suicide (before the torture) would prevent an awful fate from befalling him. We are now handling the case in which the Epicurean line is correct, so this should be more certain. With Benatar’s (odd) assumption, however, the Epicurean line (on Benatar’s reading) would say that death does not deprive him of good things, so it does not prevent him from suffering the awful fate either. So, it does not follow that John should commit suicide.¹⁸ However, this is a peculiar conclusion because even if John commits suicide, it would not be bad at all; moreover, by carrying out suicide, he can avoid the awful fate that he would otherwise have suffered. Therefore, from this perspective, McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett conclude that Benatar failed to reject the Epicurean line again, and thus, pro-mortalism should be added.

6. Non-pro-mortalism: the annihilation account

Benatar presents another objection that death per se is a bad: annihilation. The harm of death is a broad topic that includes a wide range of previous studies, so let us briefly look at one of them in order to proceed to Benatar’s argument. In previous studies on the harm of death, the deprivation account is one of the most influential ideas because of its commonsensical view: death is bad because it deprives one of the good that one would otherwise have had.¹⁹ This view has, however, several points to be argued. First, there is a case in which the deprivation account does not work out well. For instance, there may be a case of a longer life which contains no (or few) good(s) of which to be deprived when one dies. The deprivation account explains that death is bad because it deprives one of the good; therefore, if there is no good in one’s life in the first place, death is not bad. Second, it is commonsensical to say that when death exists, we no longer exist. If this is the case, then, when is death bad for the person who dies? This is the most difficult question concerning the harm of death.

Regarding the former case, Benatar presents the modified version of the deprivation account, i.e., the annihilation account. This is the view that death is bad because it “can deprive us of the goods and also thwart the interest in continued existence.”²⁰ Put another way, death is bad because it annihilates and obliterates us; therefore, one’s annihilation is considered an independent bad irrespective of the deprivation of the good. This is quite difficult to prove, and Benatar himself also accepts this difficulty.²¹ However, one good

¹⁷ Benatar, 2006, 217.

¹⁸ Their assumption is inappropriate in my view that Benatar would agree to carry out suicide in this situation. But to make their difference clear, I will follow the argument for now.

¹⁹ See Thomas Nagel, “Death,” *Noûs*, Vol.4, No.1, (1970), 73-80.

²⁰ Benatar, 2017, 103.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

reason that he suggests is that death is the irretrievable cessation of consciousness: “[a]fter all, annihilation irrevocably terminates the string of psychologically connected states that constitute one’s life.”²² This may not be sufficient to prove that death per se is bad; however, it does not seem at all implausible either.

As far as the presence of harm is concerned, the irretrievable cessation of consciousness suffices for claiming that death causes fear, and thus it is plausible to say that this mental harm is inevitable; therefore, even if the state of being dead has no value in itself, it is still possible to say that there is harm in the process of dying.

Now, we can understand why Benatar declined to supplement the pro-mortalism view. The fear someone feels when carrying out suicide (or approaching death) is irresistible. In his view, it should be irrational to carry out suicide because it causes unnecessary harm in one’s life. Thus, for Benatar, it is implausible to conclude that we should (always) commit suicide.

7. Conclusion: a provisional argument for establishing the non-anti-natalism view

The points at issue have already been reviewed; now, I will explore the inconsistencies in Benatar’s argument. First, he claims that coming into existence is always a (cause of) serious harm. If I am correct, this thesis can be interpreted as “there is plenty of harm in life that always outweighs the benefit which one can receive in life.” If this is the case, although death per se is a harm, it is likely that suicide is still preferable to continued existence because the harm of death is a fixed value (whether you die at 20 or 80, the harm of annihilation should be the same because it is independent of deprivation); thus, it is better to cease to exist as soon as possible so that one can reduce the total amount of harm from which one suffers in life. However, as confirmed above, Benatar declined the pro-mortalism view; therefore, it seems necessary for Benatar to claim that life is *good* to support the view that suicide is not (always) preferable. Put another way, it seems necessary for him to emphasize the significance of the good in life of which one would otherwise be deprived of. If this is correct, it is not implausible to extend the view that coming into existence is *not* always a harm (i.e., non-anti-natalism). Originally, Benatar’s argument was as follows: life is suffering, and thus, we should not procreate. However, now he admits that the annihilation account is hardly provable, and given that our previous argument showed the difficulty of evaluating an entire life, the only concern remaining is at whether or not we fear death or the process of dying. This idea, however, cannot be truly objective. Taking all of these arguments into consideration, I conclude that the combination of non-anti-natalism and non-pro-mortalism is the most reasonable.

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²² Ibid., 105.

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