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May 5, 2015

Final Paper

To Have Never Been Better, You Better Have Never Been

To say that one can be given the “gift of life” is not only painfully cliché, but is also simply not true, at least according to David Benatar. In his *Better Never to Have Been: Why Coming into Existence is Always a Harm*, Benatar addresses the common assumption that many take towards procreation in that they have done nothing wrong by bringing another life into existence. In doing this, he then proposes that bringing this life into existence is morally reprehensible. The mode in which people bring other people into existence is procreation. Appealing to the asymmetry between the absence of pain and pleasure to develop his stance that existence is harmful, Benatar is correct in his assertion that procreation is always a harm.

Before laying out the foundations of his argument that procreation is always a harm, it is important to understand what harm is. Procreation is always a harm if one takes harm to be leaving an individual worse off than he otherwise would have been. On the surface, this claim that procreation is always a harm seems to be a sweeping generalization. David Benatar responds to this by appealing to the fate that ultimately awaits every human: death. As if an inescapable end to life were not enough, he then draws justification for his claim from the millions that live in squalor or must cope everyday with a crippling disability. Even those with ample resources allowing them to live comfortably,—relative to those in poverty—often face anguish in their last days leading up to their imminent death. So, even an existence with positive experiences is still riddled with suffering. Those feeling disconcerted by this uncommon stance on existence will

draw on these positive experiences to attempt in mounting a defense. Although Benatar acknowledges that there are positive aspects to existence, their presence in one's life is not sufficient in justifying those that procreated in order to bring the aforementioned life into existence. He even goes so far as to say that, regardless of the distribution of positive to negative experiences— be it the positives outnumber the negatives, the negatives outnumber the positives, or the sums of each end up being identical— the experience is one of harm.

David Benatar justifies this claim of procreation being inherently harmful by appealing to the asymmetry of pain and pleasure. He begins by asserting that there are fundamental distinctions between harms— like pain— and benefits— like pleasure. In regards to the presence of the two, there is no asymmetry, for the presence of pain is as bad as the presence of pleasure is good. By bad, I mean an experience that leaves one in a worsened state than he was previously, and by good, I mean an experience that leaves one in a better state than he was previously. The asymmetry, then, comes when discussing the absence of the pains and pleasures. According to Benatar, pain's absence is good regardless of anybody experiencing the good. On the other hand, pleasure's absence is not bad unless the absence is kept from somebody able to experience it. The absence of the pain being good, regardless of a person experiencing it, does not only apply to people who do not exist, therefore rendering it useless in application to the life of someone who actually existed. This is an inaccurate reading of his claim. When read appropriately, the absence of pain being good can be applied in a counter example of somebody who actually exists with pain, but potentially could not have existed, thus rendering the pain and the person non-existent. So, in regards to the pain that that person experiences, the absence of that pain would be good even if it means that he never existed. Additionally, when speaking of the absence of pain in a

person who never existed, Benatar considers this to be good also. This is the case because of the pain that this potential person would have experienced if he were an actual person. In regards to bringing a life into existence that will suffer that would have otherwise not existed and not suffered, the absence of pain is good.

If one were to accept the asymmetry between the absence of pleasure and pain as plausible, it then leads us to draw other conclusions. To begin with, the asymmetry lends itself to the attitude that there is a duty to not bring suffering lives into existence because the absence of the pain in the person is considered good even if the person did not exist. At the same time, it also allows for room to say that there is no duty to bring people that will lead pleasurable lives into existence because, all though the pleasures that could potentially be experienced would count as a good, the absence of this pleasure would not be considered bad as there would not be a person for whom it could be bad.

To understand these conclusions drawn from the asymmetry of pain and pleasure, I will use an example involving retrospective aspects of regret. Suppose a couple is deliberating upon whether or not they should procreate, and thus make a potential existence into an actual one. As they discuss the consequences of having a child, they dedicate a portion of their discussion to the interests of the child to be. The child is sure to experience some pain in her existence. This pain, then, could be cause to regret procreating and causing her existence. If the couple chose to not have the child, however, then the child would undoubtedly not experience pain. The regret stemming from bringing a suffering child into existence would be a non-factor if the couple chose to not have a child. This is the case because it is impossible to regret not bringing a child into existence for the child's sake because the child does not exist.

Further support for David Benatar's asymmetry between the absence of pain and pleasure can be found in one's attitudes concerning the inhabiting of land. First, let us make the distinction between those places in which people live a life of suffering and places that are uninhabited by people. In regards to places inhabited by a suffering people, the somber attitudes that one takes towards their suffering is justified. It is unfortunate that people in some places live in squalor. Next, let us conceive of a place in which suffering people live, and imagine that the land were never inhabited by any beings, suffering or not. Would the attitude taken towards this uninhabited land be the same one taken towards the land when it was populated by suffering people? According to Benatar, the answer is a resounding no. To be sad for a people who could have conceivably existed, but do not exist, on an uninhabited land is to find sadness in a potential, but not yet actual, child. There is nothing in either situation to be sad for because neither the people nor the child exist.

A potential objection to the asymmetry of the absence of pleasures and pains has to do with the seemingly inconstant view of not regretting the non-existent pleasures of potential people who were never actualized, while also finding joy for the absence of pain in those that do not exist. In other words, if one cannot regret the absence of pleasures in a non-existent person, then why should he rejoice in the absence of pain in a non-existent person? If both were weighted equally, it seems, then there should be constant rejoicing in that there is an infinite amount of potential people that were never born. To this objection, Benatar responds by dismissing the contrasting relationship between regret and joy. The appropriate question to ask is not whether one feels joy in the absence of pain, but whether the lack of pain is welcome— Benatar uses the word

“welcome” to describe the opposite of regrettable. To put this objection to rest, Benatar asserts that the absence of pain is desirable for those that have never existed.

Now that the argument for the asymmetry of the absence of pain and pleasure has been laid out, it is now possible to move onto how the asymmetry relates to his position that procreation is always a harm to the individual brought into existence. Benatar begins by comparing two scenarios. In one, a person X exists, and in the other, a person X does not exist. In the first, it is uncontroversial to say that the presence of pain can be described as ‘bad’ while the presence of pleasure is ‘good.’ When describing the absence of both pleasure and pain, he deems the absence of pain as ‘good’ and the absence of pleasure as ‘not bad.’ The reason that the absence of pleasure is deemed ‘not bad’ is so the asymmetry between the absence of the two can be maintained. This absence of pleasure is a neutral state. From the descriptions of the two scenarios, it becomes obvious that nonexistence of person X is favorable. This is the case because, if person X exists, then the ‘good’ presence of pleasure is detracted from by the ‘bad’ presence of pain. In the other scenario in which person X does not exist, the absence of pain is ‘good.’ Because the absence of pleasure is considered to be in a neutral state of ‘not bad,’ then the ‘good’ is not detracted from, like in the first scenario. Some may object to the outcome of the scenario comparison by taking the position that ‘good’ is more desirable than ‘not bad.’ Normally, this would be considered the case, however this position stems from a misunderstanding of the two scenarios. The absence of pleasures in both scenarios are not equivalent to one another. In the argument for the asymmetry of the absence of pleasure and pain, Benatar asserts that the absence of pleasure is not undesirable unless “there is someone for whom this absence is a deprivation.” So, they are not equivalent because, for the scenario in which person X does not exist, the absence of pleasure

is a neutral state. There is nobody for whom the absence could be a deprivation because there is nobody in this scenario. So, because existence has the 'bad' experience of the presence of pain, then the existence is negative. The act of bringing people into existence is called procreation. Because procreation leads to a negative existence, then procreation is always a harm.

The presence of pain and pleasure are universal experiences of those that are alive. So, it is fair to say that one's existence brings along with it (at least some) pain. In his *Better Never to Have Been: Why Coming into Existence is Always a Harm*, David Benatar addresses the presence and the absence of both pleasure and pain. From the asymmetry of the absence of pleasure and pain, Benatar draws conclusions concerning the moral standing of the act of bringing people into existence. The act of bringing people into existence is called procreation. Because existence is negative, Benatar concludes that procreation is always a harm.

Works Cited

Benatar, David. "Why Coming into Existence Is Always a Harm." *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Clarendon, 2006. N. pag. Print.