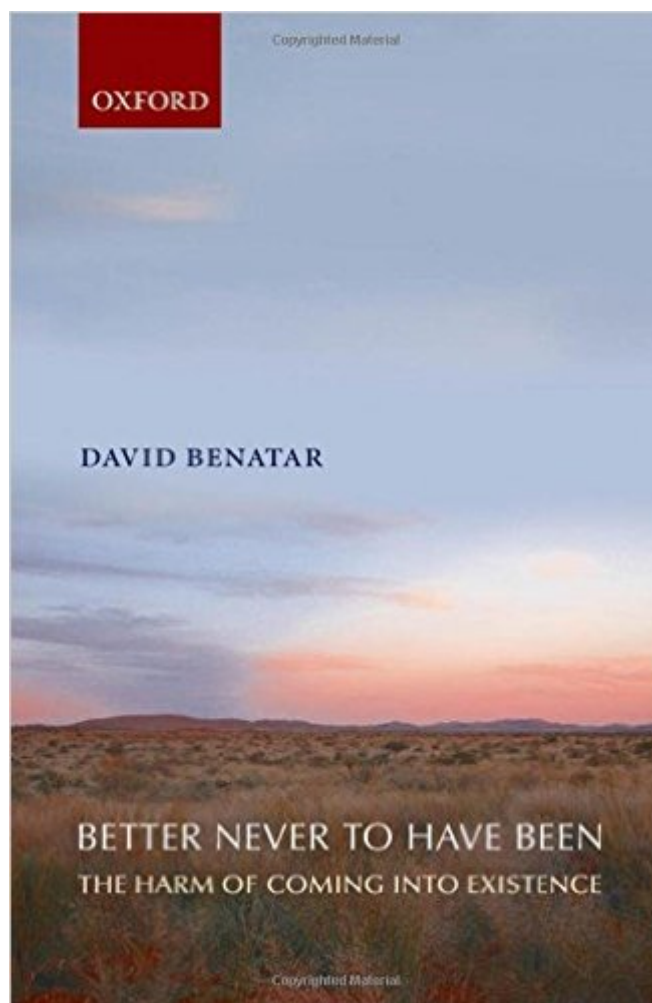


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Better Never To Have Been: The Harm Of Coming Into Existence



Synopsis

Most people believe that they were either benefited or at least not harmed by being brought into existence. Thus, if they ever do reflect on whether they should bring others into existence---rather than having children without even thinking about whether they should---they presume that they do them no harm. *Better Never to Have Been* challenges these assumptions. David Benatar argues that coming into existence is always a serious harm. Although the good things in one's life make one's life go better than it otherwise would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence. Drawing on the relevant psychological literature, the author shows that there are a number of well-documented features of human psychology that explain why people systematically overestimate the quality of their lives and why they are thus resistant to the suggestion that they were seriously harmed by being brought into existence. The author then argues for the 'anti-natal' view---that it is always wrong to have children---and he shows that combining the anti-natal view with common pro-choice views about foetal moral status yield a "pro-death" view about abortion (at the earlier stages of gestation). Anti-natalism also implies that it would be better if humanity became extinct. Although counter-intuitive for many, that implication is defended, not least by showing that it solves many conundrums of moral theory about population.

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Medical Ethics

Customer Reviews

In this remarkable book, the South African philosopher David Benatar attempts to solve, in a most unusual way, some related moral problems concerning matters of life and death. Benatar claims, inter alia, that deliberate procreation is immoral; that abortion is morally mandatory if possible before approximately 30 weeks of gestation; and that the morally optimal size of the human population is ZERO. On the face of it, this may strike the reader as absurd, or even insane, but Benatar is most certainly not a madman, as any reader who gives this book a fair chance will soon acknowledge. The above-mentioned conclusions all follow more or less straightforwardly from Benatar's main thesis, which is almost literally expressed in the title of the book: For any conscious being (whether human or non-human) it would have been better never to exist, since coming into being is always an overall harm, and thus worse than non-existence, for that being (though not necessarily for other already existing beings, e.g. parents and siblings). Benatar argues for this astounding thesis by drawing attention to an alleged asymmetry between pain and pleasure (both understood broadly): Non-existence implies the absence of both pains and pleasures, but whereas the absence of the pains is something good, it is not the case that the absence of the pleasures is bad or something to be deplored. A potential person is not deprived of anything, claims Benatar, by not being brought into existence. Some immediate, but confused, objections can be dismissed easily. One example is the objection that life must be an overall good for a person, unless that person is willing to commit suicide. Benatar is at pains to point out the important distinction between judging that a possible life should not be started and judging that an actual life should not be continued. Thus, Benatar's argument does not commit him to the view that we are morally obligated to kill ourselves and/or each other. On the contrary, he quite explicitly denounces such a view (chapter 7), but this is, strangely, lost on several of the book's reviewers. But is the alleged asymmetry a real asymmetry or only an apparent one? Benatar's argument for the reality of the asymmetry is a lot stronger than many will admit, but it is not quite as strong as he himself seems to think. At bottom, Benatar's argument is a coherence argument: Unless we accept the asymmetry, we cannot make sense of some of our other deeply held convictions, most notable, perhaps, the conviction that "while there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, there is no duty to bring happy people into being" (p. 32). However, an argument of this kind is obviously double-edged and able to cut both ways. An opponent might be willing to bite the bullet and, while rejecting asymmetry, accept that we DO have a duty to bring happy people into being. Benatar is aware of this possibility but dismisses it because he thinks it is based on the assumption that people only have derivative value as "mere means to the production of happiness" (p. 37). This, however, is much too quick. The (imaginary) opponent does not need to absurdly abstract the happiness from

the person and see the latter as being nothing but a necessary condition, without any inherent value, for the existence of the former. Rather, the question is whether a happy person, considered as a whole, has intrinsic positive value seen from the moral point of view. If this is the case, as I think it is, then it might reasonably be claimed that the possible existence of a happy person provides us with a moral reason to (try to) bring that possible person into existence. But this moral reason is, of course, by no means decisive. It might be overruled by other moral reasons pointing in the opposite direction, e.g. the reasons provided by any kind of pain experienced by the possible person, in case he/she is given life. This latter observation is important, because it means that Benatar's substantive conclusions might be correct even if we reject his claims about the alleged asymmetry. It might be the case that most, or even all, lives as a matter of fact contain more bad than can be compensated for by the actual amount of good in those lives, and exactly this view, a kind of fall back position, is what Benatar defends in the most interesting chapter of the book (chapter 3). Drawing on empirical research in social psychology, Benatar builds a strong argument to the effect that people are unreliable judges when assessing the quality of their own lives. He proceeds to show, in my opinion rather convincingly, that the quality of most people's lives is actually very bad, and that this is the case whether one adopts a hedonistic, a preference-theoretical, or an objective account of the nature of "the Good". Whether we like it or not, we do have many moral reasons, certainly more than most people realize, to STOP bringing new people into existence. Anyone who thinks that these reasons can be trumped by moral reasons for procreation has a big philosophical task on his/her hands. Generally, the book is an easy read, thanks to the clarity of Benatar's exposition of the problems, the theories, and the arguments presented. One important upside of this is that readers without an education in philosophy should be able to learn a lot from Benatar's stimulating discussion. Unfortunately, not many will. Benatar is under no illusions that his readers will accept his stance or at least consider his arguments without much prejudice. This is a pity, because neither dubious appeals to common sense nor unfair arguments ad hominem will make Benatar's arguments bad and his conclusions false, contrary to what some of this book's reviewers seem to be thinking. Just as reciting the Lord's Prayer cannot refute Atheism, a rational refutation of Benatar, if possible, must be based on some serious philosophical work. Lest wishful thinking should completely guide our actions and determine our conception of morality, philosophy should always challenge our most fundamental assumptions, and it should do so rationally, honestly, without self-deception or fear of the truth. In this work Benatar satisfies these desiderata, and that is why "Better Never to Have Been" merits attention. It deserves to be read and thought about carefully and with an open mind, and it deserves to be discussed in a

serious, fair and intelligent manner. It is a very important book.

Applied Ethics. Very argumentative. Benatar has caused turmoil in some philosophical circles. He's been read by people in Cambridge, Oxford, Princeton and other great knowledge centers. His ideas are indeed a threat to many of our naive assumptions. He criticizes common moral conclusions using premises that are generally accepted. He assumes for example that the reader agrees that:1) it is wrong to bring someone into the world if that is going to cause that person too much pain.e.g. If you are sure that person is going to have AIDS or live in extreme poverty, so that she will suffer an immensely excruciating pain.He, then, argues that:2) All lives, even the best ones are very bad. So you know, for sure, that by bringing someone to life, that person is going to suffer so much pain. Far more than pleasure.3) Therefore, it is wrong to procreate.Further conclusions:In this line of thought, abortion, for instance, in the early stages of pregnancy is not only right, but morally mandatory. In addition, he establishes a very important difference between "lives worth continuing" and "lives worth starting", arguing that we are not morally obliged to kill ourselves. Absolutely not. But since by bringing someone into life I will expose this person to serious harm, it is best not to bring anyone into life.Arguments to defend 2:1) Pleasures and the hedonistic project are condemned to defeat, since any pleasures you have will not be able to undo the pain you will necessarily suffer.2) Pain is part of the structure of the world and by bringing someone into life you are, ipso facto, exposing that person to serious harm. We entirely overlook the daily discomforts of daily life, even though they are so pervasive. Even the best lives are very bad, because our pleasures or moments of desire fulfillment are so few compared to the common negative states we constantly experience everyday. And this, in a healthy common life, not to say someone who has a terminal disease or something worse.3) Happiness is but a temporary absence of suffering, satisfaction is the ephemeral fulfillment of desire.e.g. After one has eaten or taken liquid, bowel and bladder discomfort ensues quite naturally and we have to seek relief. There are moments or even periods of satisfaction, but they occur against a background of dissatisfied striving.All that said, if you had never existed, you would not feel pain, nor die everyday, constantly, bit by bit. Therefore, someone who hasn't been brought to life, who technically isn't even a person yet, is in clear advantage to someone who came into being. Ergo, it is wrong to bring someone to life.I believe this book will become a philosophical classic, probably not as much as Nagel's Mortal Questions, but perhaps something close to it. He's certainly an author I liked to read. His book is very clear. It is important to mention that he does not assume prior philosophical knowledge from the reader and that the book is very concise.I highly recommend it.I sincerely hope my review was of some aid. Please don't forget to vote in case this

review was helpful to you.

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