The asymmetry argument, expounded in chapter 2 of his book Better Never to Have Been, is the backbone of David Benatar’s anti-natalism. If correct, it lends support to Benatar’s central claim that it is always a harm to be brought into existence. Accepting this claim does not decide the question whether bringing someone into existence is only a minor or a grave harm. However, in conjunction with Benatar’s quality of life argument – i.e., the argument that our positive judgements about the quality of our lives are systematically distorted because the quality of our lives is much worse than we usually think it is¹ —, the asymmetry argument yields the conclusion that each of us has been not only slightly but very seriously harmed by being brought into existence.

In this paper, I offer a qualified defence of the asymmetry argument. It is a qualified defence because I defend the argument only after criticizing it, and I attempt to offer a defence of the argument that incorporates this criticism. My claim is that the argument is basically correct, but that it needs to be refined and qualified in the light of this criticism. After shortly recapitulating the asymmetry argument (1), I criticize it in two steps (2). First, I argue that, in contrast to what Benatar claims, we can harm potential persons by not bringing them into existence (2.1). Second, I criticize Benatar’s attempt to defend the asymmetry argument as an argument from the best explanation for other moral intuitions that we normally hold (2.2). In part 3, I defend the argument in a way that is compatible with this criticism. The first step in my defence is to apply a distinction between harming de re and harming de dicto. When we harm potential persons by not bringing them into existence, we harm them in a de dicto, not in a de re, sense. This, I argue, shows that my claim that we can harm potential persons by not bringing them into existence is compatible with the claim that existing persons could never have been harmed by not having been brought into existence.

¹ See David Benatar, Better Never to Have Been. The Harm of Coming into Existence, (Oxford: OUP, 2006), chap. 3; David Benatar, The Human Predicament. A Candid Guide to Life’s Biggest Questions (Oxford: OUP, 2017), chap. 4.
existence (3.1). Moreover, this latter claim is true: no existing person would have been harmed by not having been brought into existence (3.2). In sum, the asymmetry argument, together with plausible empirical assumptions, shows that each of us has reason to regret our existence, though it does not establish the truth of antinatalism (4).

A preliminary remark is necessary. Any attempt to defend the view that each of us has reason to regret our existence is likely to provoke the objection that it implicitly relies on (negative) evaluative judgements about the quality of one’s life. These judgements might be wrong. In order to forestall this objection and to make my argument independent of Benatar’s quality-of-lives-argument (with whose correctness I will not be concerned), I introduce a simplifying assumption: When talking about “lives” and “existences”, I will exclusively refer to those lives that we would normally call “happy lives” – that is, lives of people who, though their life is not free from suffering, have only a moderate amount of suffering, who enjoy satisfying and deep personal relationships, who do not suffer from severe or painful diseases, who have at least a moderate amount of success in their lives and who are not the victims of discrimination, wars, famines etc. Thus, my argument does not hinge on any assumption about the badness of human lives. Even with regard to people who lead happy lives, I argue, the asymmetry thesis is correct and establishes that it would have been better for these people if they had not been brought into existence.

1 The Asymmetry Argument

The basic idea of the asymmetry argument is simple: If we had not been born, we would have been spared the sufferings of life. But we would not have been harmed by not enjoying the pleasures of life since there would have been no one who would have been deprived of these pleasures. Therefore, it would have been better for us not to have come into existence.

Underlying this asymmetry argument is the asymmetry claim, i.e., the claim that there is an axiological asymmetry between pleasures and pains. (Benatar discusses pleasures and pains only as “exemplars of harms and benefits” without committing himself to a hedonist axiology.) This asymmetry claim does not apply to the presence of pleasure and pains. With regard to these, it is, according to Benatar, uncontroversial that

(1) the presence of pain is bad

and that

(2) the presence of pleasure is good.

However, the asymmetrical evaluation of pleasure and pain applies to the absence of pleasure and pain. Benatar states that

(3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas

2 Benatar 2006 (note 1), p. 30.
(4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.

(3) and (4) together establish the asymmetry thesis (AT). (AT) is true iff (3) is true and (4) is true.

In support of the asymmetry between (3) and (4), Benatar points to the fact that (AT) “has considerable explanatory power” because it “explains at least four other asymmetries that are quite plausible”\(^3\). He mentions the following four asymmetries, all of which relate to moral intuitions that are commonly held by most people:

(i) We usually think that there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence but that there is no duty to bring happy people into being. This intuition is easily explained by (AT): While we think that it would cause harm to a suffering being to be brought into existence and that this harm ought to be avoided even though there will be no one who will enjoy its absence, we do not think that the absence of pleasure would be a harm to someone who is not brought into existence, since no one would be deprived of the pleasures. Therefore, we usually do not assume that there is a duty to procreate.

(ii) Whereas it sounds strange to give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefitted, it is not strange to cite the potential child’s interests as a reason for avoiding bringing a child into existence. (AT) easily accommodates this intuition: The absence of a potential child’s pains would be accepted as a reason for not bringing it into existence, whereas the absence of its pleasure would not be accepted as a reason against not bringing the child into existence.

(iii) Bringing people into existence and not bringing them into existence can both be regretted, but only bringing people into existence can be regretted for the sake of the person whose existence was contingent on the procreative decision, whereas not bringing people into existence cannot be regretted for this reason. (AT) tells us why we make this difference in retrospective judgements: We do not regret the absence of a good that nobody experiences and of which nobody is deprived.

(iv) Whereas we are normally sad for inhabitants of distant regions whose lives are characterized by suffering, we are not sad for happy people who, would they have been brought into existence, would have populated these distant regions. Again, (AT) offers a plausible explanation for this intuition: We regret pain and wish its absence, but we do not regret the absence of pleasures of those who could have been brought into existence but were not brought into existence.

In sum, (AT) explains all of these four plausible and commonly held intuitions. This appears to be a strong argument in favour of (AT). It is unclear, however, whether Benatar intends the explanatory power of the asymmetry thesis to be merely an argument “in support” of it (as he writes in *Better Never to Have Been*\(^4\)) or whether it bears more argumentative weight. On the first reading, the asymmetry thesis could stand on its own and could be defended independently from the

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\(^3\) Ibid., p. 31.

\(^4\) Ibid., 31.
intuitions that it is supposed to explain. Its explanatory power would merely give it additional credit. On the second reading, which Benatar seems to endorse in other passages,⁵ the explanatory power would not only give additional support to the asymmetry thesis; rather, it would then demonstrate the correctness of (AT). In other words, the argument in favour of the asymmetry would then be an argument from the best explanation; there would be no reasons for (AT) that are logically independent from its explanatory power. I will consider this second possibility in section 2.2. For the time being, I assume that the argument in favour of (AT) stands on its own and is merely given additional weight by the explanatory power of (AT).

2 A Critique of the Asymmetry Argument

In the following section, I criticize the argument from asymmetry in two steps. In the first step, I argue that Benatar wrongly denies that we can harm potential people by not bringing them into existence. In a second step, I consider a possible reply to this objection and show that it is unsatisfactory.

2.1 Can we Harm Potential People by not Bringing Them into Existence?

The second part of the asymmetry thesis consists in the claim that “the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation”, or, in other words, that the absence of pleasure is bad only if there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. According to Benatar, it implies that the absence of pleasure is not bad for those people we could bring into existence but don’t bring into existence. This conclusion follows if we accept the additional premiss that we cannot deprive the people we could bring into existence but don’t bring into existence – Benatar calls them “potential people” – of the pleasures of life. So the argument for the claim that the absence of pleasure is not bad for potential people can be reconstructed as follows:

(P1) The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is a deprivation.
(P2) Potential persons cannot be deprived of the pleasures of life.
(C) Therefore, the absence of pleasures is not bad for potential persons.

In short, my counterargument to this argument rests on the claim that if (P1) is true, (P2) is false, and vice versa: if (P2) is true, (P1) is wrong. More precisely, I think that the argument rests on an ambiguity of the meaning of the word “to deprive”. We can attach a meaning to “to deprive” that makes (P1) true, but this commits us to saying that (P2) is false, given that “to deprive” has the same meaning

⁵ See David Benatar, “Still Better Never to Have Been. A Reply to (More of) My Critics”, The Journal of Ethics Vol. 17 (2013), p. 126 (reply to Harman).
in (P1) and (P2). And we can attach a meaning to “to deprive” that renders (P2) true, but in this case, we have to admit that (P1), i.e. the conditional, is false. In other words, in this case it is not a necessary condition for the absence of pleasures being bad for a person that this person can be deprived of these pleasures. Rather, the absence of pleasures can then be bad for someone even though it is not the case that he or she is deprived of these pleasures.

What are the two senses of “to deprive” that are relevant here? In the first sense (="to deprive_1") “to deprive”, presupposes possession. “A deprives B of X” then presupposes that B possesses X. If B is not in possession of X, B cannot, for conceptual reasons, be deprived of X. In the second sense (="to deprive_2"), “to deprive” does not presuppose possession. In this case, it is possible that A deprives B of X even though B does not possess X. My claim is that, if we stipulate the first meaning of “to deprive”, (P2) is true but (P1) is false, whereas, if we stipulate the second meaning, (P1) is true but (P2) is false.

Let us assume that “to deprive” is used in the sense of “to deprive_1”, in which deprivation presupposes possession. It is evidently true that potential persons cannot be deprived_1 of the pleasures of existence. The simple reason is that, not being existent, they are not in possession of these pleasures, and this makes it conceptually true that they cannot be deprived_1 of them. However, on this meaning of “to deprive”, the conditional (1) is wrong. It is not the case that the absence of pleasures is bad for someone only if he or she can be deprived_1 of the pleasures. The reason is that, even if we do not deprive_1 the person of the good, we can still harm the person by withholding the good from her. In this case, the absence of the good is bad for that person because the person is harmed by not being given the good.

By way of illustration, think of the following scenario. A has a serious, life-threatening disease. B has the drug that would cure the disease. But B does not give the drug to A. On the meaning of “to deprive” that we consider here, i.e., on the meaning in which to be deprived of a good presupposes possession of that good, A is not thereby deprived of the drug, as he did not possess it in the first place. But certainly, the absence of the drug is bad for A. B harms A not by depriving_1 A of the life-saving drug but by withholding it from A. For A to be seriously harmed by the absence of the drug, it is not necessary that he be deprived_1 of it. Analogously, assuming that “to deprive” presupposes possession, we may harm potential persons by withholding the pleasures of life from them even though we do not deprive_1 them of these pleasures. In this case, it is true that we do not deprive_1 them of the pleasures of life, but it is wrong to assume that the absence of the pleasures of life can be bad for them only if we deprive_1 them of these pleasures. This means that we cannot arrive at the conclusion that the absence of pleasures cannot be bad for potential persons.

Let us now assume that we use “to deprive” in the sense of “to deprive_2”, in which deprivation does not presuppose possession. In this case, “to deprive” is used as a general term that includes the ideas of taking a good away from someone as well as the idea of withholding it from him. Withholding a good from someone would then be one of two ways of depriving_2 him of that good. In this case, it seems plausible to say that the conditional “The absence of pleasure can be bad only if there is
somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is a deprivation. However, the claim that potential persons – those, that would come into existence if we decided to bring them into existence – cannot be deprived of the pleasures of existence by not being brought into existence is then plainly wrong. In this broader meaning of “to deprive”, potential persons, although they are not in possession of any pleasures, can be deprived of the pleasure of life because these pleasures can be withheld from them, just as in the above example, someone from whom the drug that could cure his life-threatening disease is withheld is thereby deprived of the drug. And we can then harm potential persons by depriving them of the pleasures of life that they would otherwise, i.e. if they were brought into existence, enjoy. The absence of these pleasures would be bad for them. Again, the argument does not lead to the desired conclusion that the absence of pleasure cannot be bad for potential persons.

In sum, Benatar’s argument in support of the view that the absence of pleasures cannot be bad for potential persons rests on a fallacy of equivocation: the conditional claim that the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom the absence of pleasure is a deprivation is true in a sense of “to deprive” that is different from the one we must assign to the word in order to make the second premiss – potential persons cannot be deprived of the pleasures of life – true. Therefore, it does not follow that the absence of pleasure cannot be bad for potential persons.

2.2 The Asymmetry Argument as an Argument from the Best Explanation

Confronted with my critique of the asymmetry thesis, Benatar might reply that it misses the point of the asymmetry argument. His claim, he could insist, is not that there is a logical but that there is an axiological asymmetry between pleasure and pain. It is not that, by pain of logical inconsistency, we must admit that the asymmetry exists but rather that we should accept the asymmetry in the light of the moral intuitions that I mentioned in Sect. 1. That is, taken as an argument from the best explanation, the core idea of the argument is that as long as we accept these intuitions we ought to assume that there is an asymmetry between the absence of pleasure and the absence of pain because this asymmetry explains these intuitions. We would have to abandon these intuitions if we abandoned the view that there is such a basic asymmetry.

Adopting this strategy means that the correctness of the asymmetry claim hinges on the correctness of the intuitions that the asymmetry is supposed to explain. It is important to note that, in order for the explanatory relation between the asymmetry thesis (AT) and the moral intuition to be a good argument in favour of AT, the moral intuition has to be correct. If it is not, the explanatory relation may still be

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6 See Benatar 2006 (note 1), p. 31, note 23; Benatar 2013 (note 5), p. 126.
there, but this relation will not then provide a reason for the acceptance of AT. Some decades ago, there was a widely accepted moral intuition that homosexuality is morally wrong. The fact that homosexuality has the moral property of wrongness would certainly be a good explanation for why many people had this intuition and why it was so widely shared. The explanatory relation would exist. However, we would not say that this provides a reason for believing that homosexuality is morally wrong because the intuition that the hypothesis that homosexuality has the property of wrongness is supposed to explain (and indeed does successfully explain) is wrong.

Are the moral intuitions that the basic asymmetry is supposed to explain correct? Let us, for the sake of simplicity, focus on the first of the four asymmetries that Benatar mentions: We usually have the moral intuition that there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence but no duty to bring happy people into existence. Is this a correct intuition? Ought we to have it? Certainly, this is far from indisputable. As Benatar himself points out, some utilitarians would, with arguments that deserve to be taken seriously, call into question the correctness of the intuition. They would claim that there is a duty – albeit only a prima facie duty, i.e., one that can be overridden by other considerations – to bring happy people into existence. Most prominently, Richard Hare has argued that we have such a duty to procreate. In brief, Hare’s argument is as follows: We normally welcome being brought into existence. Most people enjoy their lives. It is plausible to assume that, under normal circumstances, those who will be brought into existence if we decide to bring them into existence will also welcome their existence and enjoy their lives. They will have a retrospective preference for having been brought into existence. The universalizability of moral judgements commits us to saying that the interests of those potential beings that could be brought into existence if we decided to bring them into existence have to play a role in our decisions. Therefore, we ought to take into account that these potential people would enjoy living if they were brought into existence, and that they would retrospectively welcome having been brought into existence just as we normally do. This, Hare argues, constitutes a prima facie duty to bring these people into existence. There is a prima facie duty to procreate.

Of course, Hare’s argument is open to many objections. I do not claim here that we should accept it. But I do claim that it is not absurd. Benatar is certainly right that “every argument must have some justificatory end”, and it would be unfair to expect him to provide compelling reasons for the correctness of the intuitions that the axiological asymmetry is meant to explain. But it would not be unfair to expect him to provide convincing arguments against those who, like Hare, question the correctness of these intuitions. But he fails to do this.

To illustrate this, consider Benatar’s discussion of Hare’s argument in favour of a duty to procreate. Benatar claims that the retrospective preference to have been brought into existence – a preference that many people have – is “uninformed”. This

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7 Benatar 2006 (note 1), p. 36f.
8 See, e.g., Richard Hare, “Abortion and the Golden Rule”, Philosophy and Public Affairs, Vol. 4 (1975), pp. 201–222.
9 Benatar 2006 (note 1), p. 32.
claim may be (and, I think, is) correct. But for Hare’s argument, this is irrelevant. The crucial point is not whether this preference is informed or uninformed but simply that many people, as a matter of empirical fact, have such a preference. According to Hare, such a preference, albeit it uninformed, needs to be considered when making reproductive decisions. Benatar, however, asks:

If a preference is uninformed why should it dictate how we should treat others? Imagine, for example, a widespread preference for having been introduced to cigarettes, which was based on ignorance of the risks of smoking. Employing Professor Hare’s rule, people with such a desire could reason: “I am glad that I was encouraged to smoke, and thus I should encourage others to smoke”. Such reasoning is troubling [when the preference is informed and even more so when it is uninformed]. Similarly, that many people are glad to have come into existence is not a good reason for bringing others into existence, especially where the preference for existence arises from the mistaken belief that one was benefited by being brought into existence.10

This counterargument to Hare is misleading. First, Hare does not claim that the retrospective preference for existence that most people have should “dictate” how we treat others but only that it should be taken into consideration as a preference among many other preferences in order to arrive at an ought-judgement about whether we ought to procreate or not. Second, while smokers certainly have a preference for smoking, even smokers are not normally glad that they were encouraged to smoke. It is not absurd to take the first preference into consideration when, for example, making a political decision about the establishment of non-smoking restaurants, whereas no one would seriously consider taking the smokers’ alleged preferences for having been encouraged to smoke into consideration. Analogously, existing people may have a retrospective preference for having been brought into existence without having a further preference for having been caused to have that retrospective preference. The reason that they do not have this second preference may be that they agree with Benatar that the first preference is uninformed – so that they would prefer not to have it. Nevertheless, they have it, and even in the absence of this second preference, the first preference may deserve consideration in reproductive decisions, just as a smoker’s preference for smoking deserves being taken into consideration even if the smoker does not have a preference for having been encouraged to smoke. Benatar wrongly assumes (or surmises) that a person who has a retrospective preference for having been brought into existence must also have a further retrospective preference for having been caused to have that first preference. He then criticizes Hare for recommending to act on this further preference, and this creates an impression of absurdity. But there is no such further preference. The person may regret having been caused to have the preference to have been born but still have it, just as a smoker may regret having been encouraged to smoke but still have a preference for smoking. It is this latter preference that, according to Hare, counts in reproductive decisions. Benatar does nothing to show that this argument is wrong.

10 Benatar 2006 (note 1), p. 154f.
In sum – and assuming that the three other asymmetries that Benatar mentions could also be challenged with good arguments – I conclude that the intuitions that the asymmetry thesis explains cannot be seen as the expression of judgements whose truth no one could rationally doubt. If there are good reasons for calling into question the correctness of these intuitions, these intuitions are too weak a basis for the asymmetry argument. And there are such reasons, as utilitarian arguments in favour of a duty to procreate demonstrate. This means that Benatar cannot simply sidestep the criticism I developed in Sect. 2.1 by claiming that the asymmetry argument is an argument from the best explanation and making it depend on the plausibility of the moral intuitions that it is meant to explain. Thus, as it stands, the asymmetry argument is unpersuasive.

3 A Defence of the Asymmetry Argument

3.1 Harming de re and Harming de dicto

In what follows I defend the asymmetry argument in a way that is compatible with the criticism I developed in the preceding sections. The core idea of this criticism was that, pace Benatar, we can harm potential persons by not bringing them into existence. The first step in my defence of the argument is to specify in what way we can harm potential persons by not bringing them into existence. I will argue that we can harm them only de dicto and not de re. The relevance of this claim is that an existing person could rightly claim that he or she would not have been harmed by not being brought into existence even though it is possible to harm potential persons by not bringing them into existence.

What is relevant for the following argument is the semantical distinction between de re and de dicto, i.e., the distinction between sentences being true or false de re or de dicto. Generally speaking, a sentence is true de re if it allows for a replacement of the terms that are used in this sentence by coreferential terms salva veritate. Quine’s examples are well-known. 11 Ralph is pointing to a man in the dark. He believes that this man is a spy. The man in the dark is also the mayor. But Ralph does not know that the man in the dark is the mayor. And he does not believe that the mayor is a spy. So Ralph believes that the man in the dark is a spy, but he does not believe that the mayor is the spy. “Ralph believes that the man Ralph is pointing to in the dark is a spy” is true de dicto, not de re. “The man Ralph is pointing to in the dark” and “the mayor” are coextensive, but replacing one term with the other term affects the truth value of the sentence, since it is not true that Ralph believes that the mayor is a spy. By contrast, “The man Ralph is pointing to in the dark is a man such that Ralph believes of this man that he is a spy” is true de re, since it would also be true if “the man that Ralph is pointing to in the dark” were replaced by “the mayor”.

11 See William V.O. Quine, “Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes”, The Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 53 (1956), pp. 177–182.
Applying this distinction to the context of harming someone, we can distinguish between harming de re and de dicto as follows. Assume that “A harms B” is true. It is true de re if it allows for the terms “A” and “B” to be replaced with coreferential terms salva veritate. Otherwise, it is true de dicto. Thus, if replacing “B” with a coreferential term affects the truth value of the sentence, it is true de dicto, otherwise it is true de re.¹²

Let us apply this to a concrete example of a reproductive decision. Assume a couple has to make a decision whether to procreate or not. Assume further that in case the couple decides in favour of procreation, they will bring into existence a happy child, Jim. Of course, in the ex ante situation in which the couple has to make the decision whether to procreate or not, it does not know that the child they will bring into existence will be Jim, but as a matter of fact, it will be the case that if they procreate, Jim will come into existence. Thus, the potential child that the couple could bring into existence if they decide to reproduce is Jim. The terms “the potential child that will be brought into existence if the couple decides in favour of procreation” and “Jim” refer to the same object – to Jim.

According to my argument in Sect. 2.1, it is correct to say of the couple that by not procreating they would harm the potential being that could have come into existence if they had decided to procreate. But does it follow from this that by not procreating they would have harmed Jim? No, it does not follow. The reason is that they harm the potential child only de dicto and not de re. In other words, from

(1) The couple, by not procreating, will harm the potential person that would come into existence if the couple procreated. and
(2) The potential person that would come into existence if the couple procreated is Jim. it does not follow that:
(3) The couple, by not procreating, will harm Jim.

Replacing “the potential person that would come into existence if the couple procreated” with the coreferential designator “Jim” here affects the truth value of the sentence. (1) is true, (3) is false. From (1) and (2), (3) does not follow. The fact that the couple, by not procreating, will harm the potential person that would come into existence if they procreated does not entail that they would thereby harm Jim even though this potential person, if it were brought into existence, would be Jim.

Why is this important? Assume that the couple decides in favour of procreation, and here, twenty years later, we have Jim, a splendid looking and bright young man, with a wonderful partner at his side and a promising career ahead of him. If my argument is sound, the fact that the couple, in the ex ante situation in which they had to make the procreative decision, would have harmed a potential person by not bringing this person into existence, does not entail that Jim, twenty years later, would be wrong in saying that he, Jim, would not have been harmed by not having been brought into existence. And the crucial point is that Jim could say this even if he accepted my critique of Benatar’s argument. He could consistently embrace the truth of both propositions: He, Jim, would not have been harmed by not having been

¹² See Caspar (not Richard!) Hare: “Must We Respect the Interests of People Who Do Not, and Will Never, Exist?”, *Ethics*, Vol. 117 (2007), pp. 514–520.
brought into existence and his parents, by deciding against procreation, would have harmed a potential person that could have benefited from the pleasures of life if this person had been brought into existence. They would have harmed this potential person de dicto; so this would not imply that Jim, who has been brought into existence, would have been harmed by not having been brought into existence. More generally, the following two propositions can both simultaneously be accepted as true:

(i) By not bringing into existence a happy being, we harm a potential person – the person that would come into existence if we decided to bring her into existence.
(ii) An existing (happy) person would not have been harmed by not being brought into existence.

(i) captures our intuition that if a couple decides against bringing a happy being into existence, something would be lost, that it would, in some sense, “be a pity” not to bring a happy being into existence. (ii), however, reminds us of the fact that this should not lead us to think that existing persons would have been harmed by not having been brought into existence. Not seeing the difference between (i) and (ii) might delude us into thinking that we, existing persons, would have lost something – the benefits of life – by not having been brought into existence.

### 3.2 Would an Existing Person Have Been Harmed by not Having Been Brought Into Existence?

However, by showing that (i) and (ii) are compatible, I have done nothing to show that (ii) is actually true, only that, if it is true, this would not preclude us from accepting (i), which is the core of my critique of the asymmetry argument as defended by Benatar. So why should we accept (ii) as true? Why should we accept that no one – no existing person – would have been harmed by not having been brought into existence? Given that I criticized Benatar for not taking into consideration that we can harm somebody by withholding a good from him (but not depriving him of the good), the claim that an existing person could not have been harmed by not having been brought into existence is far from trivial. It needs to be supported by good arguments.

To endorse the view that no existing person would have been harmed by not having been brought into existence is not to deny that an existing person could muse about the counterfactual scenario in which he would not have been brought into existence with some melancholy. Many people are (or profess to be) glad to exist and could address their parents by saying: “If you had not procreated, I would not have existed – what a pity that would have been!” As far as logic goes, there is nothing wrong with this thought. But I do deny that these people could coherently claim that in the counterfactual scenario they would have been harmed. The argument for this claim comprises two steps. It relies on the notion of harming.
3.2.1 Harming and Identity

What is it to harm somebody? According to a plausible standard conception of "harming" – the counterfactual conception of "harming" –, A harms B by doing H if B would (under normal circumstances) have been better off without H than with H.\(^{13}\) I harm you by punching you in the face if, without my punching you in the face, you would have been better off than you actually are in a situation in which I did punch you in the face. Or, more explicitly: A harms B by doing H if B would have been better off without H than B is with H. In this more explicit formulation, the two occurrences of “B” in the conditional clause indicate that judgements about harming presuppose identity. Trivially, A would not harm B by doing H if somebody else than B would have been better off without H than with H. A harms B only if the person who would have been better off in the counterfactual scenario without H is identical with B. Call this the identity-condition. This condition must be met for a judgement about harming to be true.

3.2.2 Why no Existing Person Could Have Been Harmed by not Having Been Brought Into Existence

Can this identity-condition be satisfied for a statement about harming that says that someone would have been harmed if he had not been brought into existence? No, it cannot. When an existing person thinks about a counterfactual scenario in which she would not have been brought into existence, this existing person cannot think of the potential person that would have been worse off in the scenario in which she would not have been brought into existence as of herself.

To illustrate this, think again of the happy Jim. My claim is that Jim, when thinking about a counterfactual scenario in which his parents would have decided against procreation, cannot think of the potential person they would have harmed by deciding against procreation as being identical with him. Therefore, he cannot think that in this counterfactual scenario his parents would have harmed him. The simple reason is that Jim exists. The fact that Jim exists determines his identity, so he can think of himself only as an existing person. As his existence is contingent on his parents’ decision to procreate, thinking about a scenario in which his parents would have decided not to procreate means thinking about a scenario in which he would not have been harmed. Once Jim exists, he cannot, for logical reasons, think of himself as of the potential person that would have been harmed if the antecedent of the conditional “If my parents had decided not to procreate, they would have harmed a potential person” were true. This impossibility is brought to light more clearly when we try to formulate the sentence in a way that the identity condition is being fulfilled. Consider the following proposition: “In a counterfactual scenario in which the existing Jim would not have been brought into existence, the existing Jim would have been worse off than the existing Jim is in the real world”. The absurdity of

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\(^{13}\) See Joel Feinberg, “Wrongful Life and the Counterfactual Element in Harming” in J. Feinberg, Freedom and Fulfillment. Philosophical Essays (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 6–11.
this sentence is glaring. The consequent of the conditional here refers to an existing
entity of which the antecedent states that this same entity does not exist. This is sim-
ply contradictory. Every scenario in which a couple would have harmed a potential
person by not reproducing would not have been a scenario in which they would have
harmed an existing person.

While Jim cannot (and no existing person can) think of himself as being deprived
of the pleasures of life in the counterfactual scenario in which he would not have
been brought into existence, he can, by contrast, very well think of himself as of a
person that would have been spared the pains of life if he had not been brought into
existence. The reason, again, is simply that he exists. Existing, he experiences the
pain. And he can think about the counterfactual scenario in which he did not exist
as a scenario in which he, the existing person, would have been spared the pains of
life – whereas, for the reasons I mentioned, he cannot think of this scenario as one in
which he, the existing person, would have been deprived of the pleasures of life but
only as a scenario in which someone, a potential person, would have been deprived
of the pleasures of life. We here see Benatar’s asymmetry reemerging: the asym-
metry really exists if an existing person thinks about the counterfactual scenario
in which she would not have existed. For this existing person, the absence of pain
would have been something that she would have been spared in the counterfactual
scenario, whereas the absence of pleasures would not be something that would have
harmed her but only someone of whom she cannot think as of herself – a potential
person.

This defence of the asymmetry argument effectively blocks one of the most com-
mon objections against Benatar’s argument, namely that, if the first part of the asym-
metry claim – the part that relates to the absence of pain – is true, the second part
must be altered. The first part points to the fact that an existing person may, when
meditating upon the pains and sufferings of life, think that it would have been good
for her, the existing person, if these pains had been spared her. A common response
to Benatar is: But if the absence of pain (in the case of non-existence) would have
been good for that existing person, the absence of pleasure would (in the case of
non-existence) have been bad for that existing person. If I, the existing person,
have reason to welcome the absence of pain in the counterfactual scenario of my
non-existence, I also have reason to lament the absence of pleasures in exactly this
counterfactual scenario.14 It should now be clear why this objection is misguided:
because the potential person who would have been deprived of the pleasures of life
in the scenario of my non-existence would not have been me. There is no reason
for me to lament the absence of pleasures in this scenario because I would not have
been deprived of it, whereas there is reason to welcome the absence of pain in this
counterfactual scenario because I would have been spared them.

14 See, e.g., Christine Overall, Why Have Children? The Ethical Debate (Cambridge, Mass. / London:
MIT Press, 2012), pp. 97–101, and Erik Magnusson, “How to Reject Benatar’s Asymmetry Argument”,
Bioethics, Vol. 33 (2019), p. 678.
4 Concluding Remarks

It transpires that the asymmetry argument is ultimately successful. No existing person would have been harmed by not having been brought into existence. However, every existing person would have been spared the grave and minor harms, the vicissitudes and pin-pricks of life if she had not been brought into existence. For an existing person, the absence of pain would have been good in the counterfactual scenario in which this person would not have been brought into existence, but the absence of pleasures would not have been bad for this existing person.

This conclusion alone does not warrant that it is rational to regret one’s existence. The fact that no existing person would have been harmed by not having been brought into existence does not entail that we harm someone by bringing him into existence, just as the fact that I would not have harmed you by not inviting you to my birthday party does not entail that I have harmed you by inviting you to it. One might still argue that, although no existing person would have been harmed by not having been brought into existence, it could still be good for a person to have been brought into existence. However, although the asymmetry argument, in the version I have defended, does not logically entail the conclusion that it is rational to regret one’s existence, it does, in combination with a highly plausible empirical assumption, provide a good reason for regretting one’s existence. Why is this the case?

The asymmetry argument, if correct, undermines the possibility of weighing the good and the bad things in our lives when comparing existence with non-existence. Even though there is a strong psychological temptation to invoke the good things in one’s life when comparing existence with non-existence (“There are many good things in my life, so it’s good that I exist!”), the asymmetry argument reminds us that this weighing of good and bad things in our lives is misguided when comparing existence with non-existence because in the counterfactual scenario of one’s non-existence the absence of good things would not have been a loss for us as existing persons. Given that we resist the temptation of stacking up the harms of existence against its benefits, we need no more than a highly plausible, even uncontested empirical premiss to arrive at the conclusion that it is rational for us to regret our existence – namely that every life contains some bad things. No one seriously denies that this is the case. If this is the case and if the asymmetry argument is correct, as I have suggested, then we are justified in concluding that each of us was harmed by being brought into existence. If we had not been brought into existence, we would have been better off with regard to the bad things in life, whose absence would have been a gain for us, and we would not have been worse off with regard to the good things in life, whose absence would not have been a loss for us. It is therefore rational for us to regret our existence, even if we have a happy life.

Let me conclude by saying that, although my argument supports the view that it is rational to regret one’s existence, it does not commit us to accepting anti-natalism. As Benatar himself states, the asymmetry argument needs to be supplemented by

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15 See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), p. 489.
the quality of life argument in order to yield the anti-natalist conclusion. 16 This is the case for at least two reasons. First, the argument leaves open the possibility that the harm we inflict on a being by bringing it into existence is only slight and that it may be outweighed by other considerations. It may be outweighed, for example, by the consideration that prospective parents regard rearing a child as something that gives meaning to their lives and that they would feel deprived of an essential part of their lives if they abstained from procreation. If the harm that is inflicted on the child is only slight, this consideration might justify procreation. Second, we must distinguish between the proposition that it is bad for a person that this person came into existence and the proposition that it is bad that this person came into existence. It may well be the case that the first proposition is true, while the second proposition is false. It may be the case that it is bad for a person to have been brought into existence but that it is not bad that this person came into existence. While, for example, it may have been bad for Kafka – who led a very unhappy life – that he came into existence, we certainly would not say that it is bad that Kafka came into existence. Though it was bad for him, it was not bad simpliciter. Had we been given the opportunity to advise his parents on their procreative decision in 1883 in the knowledge of all its consequences, we would have strongly urged them to procreate since Kafka’s existence turned out to be good for us who benefitted from his works and whose lives are made a bit better by benefiting from them. Thus, optimistic prospective parents might justify procreation by pointing to the fact that, even though they harm their child by bringing it into existence, bringing it into existence might be good not for the child itself but for others.

In sum, the asymmetry argument can be defended as an argument that demonstrates that it is rational for each of us to regret having been brought into existence, but further argument is needed to establish the truth of anti-natalism.

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16 See David Benatar / David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation. Is It Wrong to Reproduce?* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), p. 40.