

Philosophy Pub  
w/ Deke Gould  
Monday, 5 March 2018

“Is it Morally Wrong to Bring a Child into This World?” (handout)

**Terminology (very rough formulations, starting points):**

- anti-natalism: the view that people should stop procreating
- pro-natalism: the view that it is permissible for people to procreate
- pro-adoption: the view that it is preferable, *ceteris paribus*, for people to adopt children than to procreate

**General Guiding Questions:**

- Is it morally wrong to bring a child into this world?
- Are people who don't have children “selfish”?
- Are there any reasons why, in general, it is better to not be born?
- Are there any reasons why, given the current state and direction of the world, it would be better to not give birth to a child?
- Is it better, all things considered, for humanity to exist in the universe?

**Anti-Natalist Arguments & Diagrams:**

“Weak” Asymmetry Argument (Rieder):

- In cases where a potential offspring would lead a life that is not worth living, one should not procreate to produce that offspring.
- If that's right, then for similar reasons, (a) it would be wrong to produce offspring whose lives are mostly terrible, but just barely worth living (“Sad Worth Living” cases, p298).
- However, by a similar token, it is not obvious that one is obligated to *create* a person in order to experience happiness.
- So, there is an asymmetry in our procreative obligations: we ought not create people in some cases, based on the overall (negative) quality of life, but we are not obligated to create some other people based on the the overall (positive) quality of life.

Benatar's “Strong” Asymmetry Argument:

- There is an asymmetry between the value of existence and non-existence: on balance, non-existence is more valuable than existence. (see diagram below)
- We should prefer whatever has more value.
- If those first two premises are correct, then we are harming people by bringing them into existence.
- We shouldn't harm people.
- Therefore, we shouldn't have children.

(adapted from Benatar 1997, p347)

| Scenario A (X exists)           | Scenario B (X never exists)      |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Presence of Pain (Bad, -1)      | Absence of Pain (Good, +1)       |
| Presence of Pleasure (Good, +1) | Absence of Pleasure (Not Bad, 0) |
| <b>On balance: 0</b>            | <b>On balance: +1</b>            |

## References:

### Popular Sources (for a general audience):

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2. Rothman, Joshua and David Benatar. "The Case for not Being Born." *New Yorker*. 27 November 2017. URL: <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-case-for-not-being-born>
3. Singer, Peter. "Should This Be the Last Generation?" *New York Times: The Stone*. 6 June 2010. URL: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/06/06/should-this-be-the-last-generation/>

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1. Benatar, David. (1997) "Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence." *American Philosophical Quarterly*. 34.3: 345-355.
2. Benatar, David. (2008) *Better Never to Have Been: the Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford University Press.
3. Benatar, David. (2013) "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics." *Journal of Ethics*. 17: 121-151.
4. LaFollette, Hugh. (1980) "Licensing Parents." *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. 9.2: 182-197.
5. McMahon, Jeff. (1981) "Problems of Population Choice." *Ethics*. 92.1: 96-127.
6. McMahon, Jeff. (2009) "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist." *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics, and the Nonidentity Problem*. Melinda A. Roberts and David T. Wasserman. Dordrecht: Springer. 49-68.
7. Rieder, Travis N. (2015) "Procreation, Adoption and the Contours of Obligation." *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. 32.3: 293-309.
8. Roberts, Melinda. (2011a) "An Asymmetry in the Ethics of Procreation." *Philosophy Compass*. 6.11: 765-776.
9. Roberts, Melinda. (2011b) "The Asymmetry: A Solution." *Theoria*. 77.4: 333-367.