

Thursday, 2 May 2024

filmosofia 6 at Rozz-Tox

Arrival (2016 Villeneuve, dir.) & “Why It Is Better Never To Come Into Existence” (Benatar 1997)¹

Agenda:

- film starts 7:00pm
- 10 minute break
- post-screening discussion of Benatar reading selection and film from 9:10pm to 10:00pm

Pre-screening discussion (6:30pm)

- general remarks about filmsosofia series:
 - each month last year (August through December), we screened a film, and pairing it with a famous philosophical text that examines themes related to that film
 - most selections concerned metaphysical topics, although some concerned value theory (axiology)
 - four main branches of philosophy:
 - metaphysics
 - epistemology
 - axiology
 - logic
 - stay tuned for updates about the 2024 filmsosofia lineup and free print articles available here at Rozz-Tox
 - instagram: @casuallyinefficacious

¹ Benatar, D. (1997) “Why it is better never to come into existence.” *American Philosophical Quarterly*. 34.3: 345-355.

- More details on the four main branches of philosophy:
 - metaphysics: the theory of reality
 - notable sub-fields: ontology (the study of what exists), philosophy of mind (theory of the nature of mind)
 - epistemology: the theory of knowledge
 - notable sub-fields: analysis of ‘knowledge’ (challenges to the “Justified True Belief” model), debates over the a priori vs. a posteriori justification (whether there is justification independent of experience)
 - axiology: the theory of value
 - notable sub-fields: normative ethics (theory of right/wrong), aesthetics (theory of good/bad art)
 - logic: the theory of right reasoning
 - notable sub-fields: classical logic (modern formal theory of entailment), non-classical logics (formal theories that reject assumptions in classical logic, such as the principle of explosion (*ex falso quodlibet*) in paraconsistent logics)
- tonight’s topic: axiology—specifically, a question in normative ethics
 - Is it morally permissible to procreate?
 - full confession: there are many worthwhile themes that we could discuss in *Arrival*
 - there are metaphysical questions concerning the nature of time (circular or linear?)
 - there are epistemological questions concerning how the linguist Louise Banks knows what will happen (internalist vs. externalist justification?)
 - my focus concerns Louise’s decision to have a child despite her knowledge of her daughter’s grim fate...

Two key concepts:

- pro-natalism: it is morally permissible for people to procreate, in most typical cases.
- anti-natalism: it is never morally permissible for people to procreate

The “basic asymmetry” that motivates the Asymmetry Argument for anti-natalism:

1. the presence of pain is bad,
2. the presence of pleasure is good,
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 (Benatar 1997, p345-346)²

Benatar’s (1997) core argument, reconstructed in well-crafted (skeletal) form:

- A. If the basic asymmetry is correct, then (3) is better than (1) but (2) is not better than (4).
- B. If (3) is better than (1) but (2) is not better than (4), then (2) is good for the individual who exists, but is not better than (4) for the person who does not exist.
- C. Thus, there are “no net benefits of coming into existence compared to never existing.”³
- D. If there are no net benefits of coming into existence compared to never existing, and human existence involves suffering, then by procreating one causes harm to the procreated unnecessarily.
- E. Human existence involves suffering and one should not harm another unnecessarily.
- F. Therefore, one should not procreate.

² See also, Benatar, D. (2006) *Better Never To Have Been*. Oxford UP. Benatar, D. “The owl and the ostrich: reply to Sami Pihlstrom on ethical unthinkables and philosophical seriousness.” *Metaphilosophy*. 42.5: 605-616. Benatar, D. (2019) “Not ‘not ‘better never to have been’’: a reply to Christine Overall.” *Philosophia*. 47: 353-367. Benatar, D. (2022) “Misconceived: why these further criticisms of anti-natalism fail.” *Journal of Value Inquiry*. 56: 119-151.

³ Benatar, D. (2013) “Still Better never to have been: a reply to (more of) my critics. *Journal of Ethics*. 17. 121-151. p123.

Connection to the film:

- Louise decides to have her child, despite her foreknowledge that her daughter Hannah will die at a young age of an unspecified terminal illness.
- Ian Donnelly (the physicist and Louise's husband in the future) told Louise that her decision was a mistake.
 - the specific circumstances related to Hannah's illness might be part of the reason
 - however, an anti-natalist would insist that this is the very same decision that faces all of us when we procreate: length of time on this earth is irrelevant.
 - "We *all* face death." (Benatar 1997, p345)
 - for the anti-natalist, bringing another person into existence is tantamount to condemning someone to face death unnecessarily, whether that is at 40 or at 90 (1997 p348)
- Thus, if the asymmetry argument above is sound, Ian's objection to Louise is correct and moreover, his objection applies to all of us when we consider the permissibility of procreation.

Problems for the Asymmetry Argument:

- There are many professional philosophers who criticize Benatar's anti-natalist project, many of which he has responded to in articles cited above.
- To choose two: there is a future-minds objection and the modal ambiguity objection
 - future minds: there's nothing in principle possible preventing us from designing minds that won't endure the sorts of suffering (even at the thought of death) that we in fact endure as a result of our psychological constitution. The asymmetry thus does not apply to such future possible minds, and there might even be reasons in favor of creating such minds.⁴
 - modal ambiguity: comparisons of value across possible worlds causes an equivocation—there's a difference between something good "from here" vs. good "from there".⁵

⁴ Gould, D. (2021) "Future minds and a new challenge to anti-natalism." *Bioethics*. 35.8: 793-800.

⁵ Piller, C. (2022) "Benatar's anti-natalism: philosophically flawed, morally dubious." *Philosophia*. 51.2: 897-917.