



DISCUSSION NOTE

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Benatar and the Logic of Betterness

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THE PRIMARY ARGUMENT OF DAVID BENATAR'S *Better Never to Have Been* is an argument for the claim that coming into existence is always harmful, because it is always worse for an individual to begin to exist than never to have existed (Benatar 2006: 30-49). Thus, it is always morally wrong to procreate. Several commentators have objected to this argument, including Persson (2009), Doyal (2007), McMahan (2009), Harman (2009) and Kaposy (2009). While each of these commentators raises important points, the most fundamental problem has not been identified. In what follows, I explain the argument and identify the problem.

I. Benatar's Asymmetry Argument

We will follow Benatar and suppose, for the purposes of this argument, that hedonism is true: pleasure and pain are the only basic intrinsic goods and evils.¹ Benatar asks us to compare a situation (A) in which an individual comes into existence, and thereafter experiences some pleasures and pains, with a situation (B) in which the person never comes into existence. Benatar argues that we should accept the following two claims concerning these two scenarios:

- (1) The absence of pain in (B) is intrinsically better than the presence of pain in (A).
- (2) The presence of pleasure in (A) is not intrinsically better than the absence of pleasure in (B) (2006: 41-2).

Given these two claims, we can conclude that (B) is better than (A) – that is, it is better not to exist than to exist – since not existing is better in one way than existing, but existing is not better in any way than not existing. Thus, coming into existence is always harmful, and nobody should ever have children.

¹ Here and throughout I will formulate the arguments in terms of value *simpliciter* rather than value for a subject, or well-being. How Benatar intends his arguments to be understood is unclear; his most official-looking formulations of the arguments do not appeal to value for a subject, but he does say things like this: the judgment that the absence of pain is good “is made with reference to the (potential) interests of a person who either does or does not exist ... if there is any (obviously loose) sense in which the absence of pain is good for the person who could have existed but does not exist, this is it” (2006: 30-31). So it appears he intends to be talking, in some loose sense, about personal well-being rather than value *simpliciter* (assuming he does, in fact, think there is a loose sense in which the absence of pain is good for the person who does not exist). I formulate the arguments in terms of value *simpliciter* for simplicity's sake, and to avoid any strangeness involved in talking about value for people who never exist. I take it that this does not, by itself, improve the strength of my arguments. The logic of intrinsic value and the logic of intrinsic-value-for-a-person surely share crucial features, such that the relevant claims about the logic of intrinsic value will seem equally plausible when considered as claims about the logic of intrinsic-value-for-a-person.

The asymmetry between (1) and (2) is supposed to be justified by the explanatory work that it does. For one thing, it is supposed to explain why it is obligatory to fail to procreate when procreating would result in a bad life for the child, but it is not obligatory to procreate when the resulting child would have a good life. Having a bad life is a disadvantage relative to having no life, per (1), but having a good life is not an advantage relative to having no life, per (2). Furthermore, it would help solve Parfit's "non-identity problem" (Parfit 1984: 358); it would explain why it is impermissible to procreate knowingly in cases where (i) the resulting person would have a painful disease, (ii) the person would nevertheless have a life that is good overall, but (iii) the parents could have instead conceived a different child who would not have had the disease. The pains experienced by the child count against conception, per (1), but the pleasures do not count in favor, per (2); thus procreation is wrong in this case too.

An important point of clarification: Benatar does not claim that pleasure is *never* better than its absence. It is better when there is a person who is deprived of the pleasure. When the person never exists, on the other hand, there is no deprivation. In such cases, pleasure is not better than its absence (2006: 41). This distinction is taken to be critical by Benatar but, as I will show in Section III, it does not help Benatar's argument at all.

II. The Logic of Betterness

There are many ways in which one might wish to object to Benatar's argument. We might ask *for whom* the absence of pain is better. We might argue that we can better explain the difference in our claims about procreation by appealing to a distinction between positive and negative rights, or some other important distinction. But none of this is necessary, for the problem with Benatar's argument is very simple: (2) is incompatible with the meanings of "good" and "better." If pleasure is intrinsically good, and the absence of pleasure is not, then pleasure must be intrinsically better than the absence of pleasure. To claim otherwise is to wreak havoc with the logic of preferability or betterness. I suggest (uncharitably) that, despite the extensive discussion Benatar's asymmetry has generated, nobody in fact understands what Benatar is asserting with his asymmetry claim – for if they did, they would recognize that it is incoherent.

In extant literature on the logic of preference or betterness, there are two ways to define goodness in terms of betterness. Albert Brogan and G.H. von Wright endorse the following definition: p is good iff p is better than $\sim p$ (Brogan 1919: 98; von Wright 1963: 34; Hansson and Grüne-Yanoff 2009). Given this definition, if it is good that John experiences some pleasure, then it is better that John experience some pleasure than not. But this is just another way of saying that John's pleasure is better than its absence, contrary to Benatar's premise (2).

Roderick Chisholm and Ernest Sosa reject the Brogan/von Wright definition in favor of the following: “a state of affairs is good provided it is better than some state of affairs that is indifferent” (1966: 246). From this definition, Chisholm and Sosa derive the following theorem: (T27) if p is good, and q is not good, then p is better than q (1966: 248; Chisholm 1968: 25). The conjunction of hedonism and Benatar’s premise (2) is incompatible with this theorem. Since hedonism is merely an illustrative assumption, we must, on pain of contradiction, choose between (2) and (T27). So Benatar’s argument is incompatible with the most promising ways of defining goodness in terms of betterness.

In deriving (T27), Chisholm and Sosa appeal to the following definition of “same value”: to say that two states have the same intrinsic value is to say that neither is better than the other (1966: 247; also see Brogan 1919: 97). It is safe to assume that Benatar thinks that the absence of pleasure is not better than the presence of pleasure. From this assumption and (2), it follows that pleasure and the absence of pleasure have the same value. And from the fact that the absence of pleasure is not good, it follows that pleasure is not good either, contrary to our assumption of hedonism. So (2) again leads to a contradiction. Thus Benatar needs a new definition of “same value.” In fact it seems Benatar will need a new definition for every axiological concept. His argument is far more radical than he realizes.²

III. Replies

As mentioned above, Benatar makes a distinction between the absence of pleasure in an existing person and the absence of pleasure in a nonexistent person. In the case of someone who exists, pleasure is better than its absence; but pleasure in an existing person is not better than the absence of pleasure in a nonexistent person. Does this distinction help rescue premise (2)? What difference might there be between the absence of pleasure in an existing person and the absence of pleasure in a nonexistent person? There are two possible differences, neither of which is of much use to Benatar.

First, we might think that while the absence of pleasure in an existing person has an intrinsic value of zero, the absence of pleasure in a nonexistent person has no intrinsic value at all – not even zero. This is suggested by the following remark: “Absent pleasures in Scenario B [in which the person never exists], by contrast, are not neutral states of some person. They are no states of a person at all” (2006: 41). Suppose a couple is contemplating conceiving a child, who would be named John. Let J1 be the state of affairs consisting of John not existing and not getting any pleasure. Suppose J1 has no

² Note that the objection does not hinge on the claim (endorsed in Brogan 1919) that betterness is fundamental and goodness is derivative. It depends only on the claim that there is some necessary connection between the two.

intrinsic value at all, whether positive, negative or neutral. This is compatible with (2), since the betterness relation holds only between states that have some positive, negative or neutral value. But now consider J2: that John does not exist and does not get any *pain*. Does J2 have some positive, negative or neutral value? What reason could there be for saying that J1 does not have any intrinsic value but J2 does? If, as Benatar says, the reason that absent pleasures in a nonexistent person do not have neutral value is that the absent pleasure is not a state of any person, absent pains in a nonexistent person must also fail to have neutral value. If J2 has no intrinsic value, then Benatar's (1) is false. So the claim that absent pleasures in nonexistent people have no intrinsic value is unhelpful to Benatar's claim of asymmetry.

Second, we might try to find a vulnerability in Chisholm and Sosa's logic of betterness. Recall that according to Chisholm and Sosa, two states have the same value if and only if neither is better than the other. This definition allowed us to derive contradictions from (2). But it is sometimes argued that there are cases in which x is not better than y , y is not better than x , and x and y are not equal in value; they have incomparable values (see Chang 1997). Benatar does not discuss incomparability, which suggests he does not intend his argument to rest on it. Nevertheless, we should consider whether an appeal to incomparability could rescue his view. The imagined reply goes as follows: when Benatar says, in (2), that pleasure is not better than the absence of pleasure, he is not committed to saying that it is worse or equal in value; rather, pleasure and its absence have incomparable values.

But several roadblocks emerge for Benatar. (a) As before, we must wonder why the presence of pain is comparable in value with the absence of pain in the nonexistent (per (1)) but pleasure and its absence in the nonexistent are not comparable. There seems to be no reason to say this, except that it is required to maintain Benatar's asymmetry. (b) It is hard to see in what distinct way the absence of pleasure has value at all; is there a distinct scale of value on which the values of absences can be weighed? This seems implausible, and there is no evidence Benatar believes in any such thing. (c) Suppose absences are comparable with each other, so that the absence of pleasure in the nonexistent is comparable in value with the absence of pain in the nonexistent. Then assuming (1), and assuming that existing pleasures and pains are comparable in value, transitivity yields comparability between pleasure and the absence of pleasure in the nonexistent, contrary to (2).³

Of course, it is possible that both the Chisholm/Sosa and Brogan/von Wright definitions of goodness in terms of betterness are mistaken. No doubt Benatar will reject them, since they lead to contradictions when combined with his own premises! And they seem to need refinement if they are to allow for incomparabilities. But it is difficult to see how any plausible revi-

³ Broome takes transitivity to be a "principle of logic" (1997: 68). It seems safe to assume Benatar accepts transitivity, since he does not use a denial of transitivity to avoid the repugnant conclusion (Benatar 2006: 168-82).

sions to those definitions will yield Benatar's asymmetry claim. In any case, Benatar cannot merely reject the definitions and theorems on offer; he must either put something in their place, or tell us what, in the absence of such definitions, justifies inferences from claims about goodness and badness to claims about betterness and preferability. Until such time, it seems reasonable to conclude that existing is better in one way, but worse in another, than not existing. Thus, as long as the amount of intrinsic goodness in a life outweighs the amount of intrinsic badness, the life is worth starting. Existing is not always harmful.⁴

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