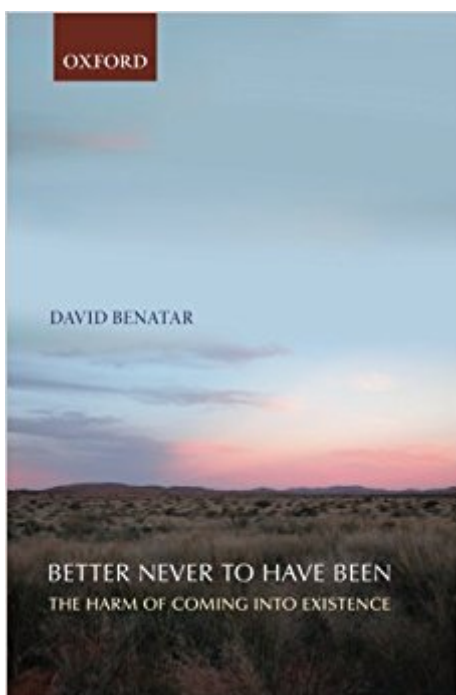


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Better Never To Have Been: The Harm Of Coming Into Existence



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.

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (September 15, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199549265

ISBN-13: 978-0199549269

Product Dimensions: 7.9 x 0.6 x 5.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.8 out of 5 stars 47 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #177,494 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #139 in Books > Textbooks >

Medicine & Health Sciences > Administration & Policy > Ethics #165 in Books > Politics & Social

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Customer Reviews

Benatar's discussion is clear and intelligent. * Yujin Nagasawa MIND * For those who admire really careful and imaginative argumentation, and are interested in either issues of life and death, or the foundations of morality, it's a must read * Harry Brighouse, Out of the Crooked Timber * This isn't a new book, but it is generating increasing discussion in university departments and elsewhere: hence this review... If you enjoy an ethical challenge, then read this book. * Malcolm Torry, Triple Helix *

David Benatar is currently Senior Lecturer in the Philosophy Department at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. He received his Ph.D. from that university, did post-doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison from 1993 to 1995, and was Visiting Assistant Professor at the College of Charleston, South Carolina, from 1995 until 1997. His teaching and research interests are in moral philosophy and related areas. In 1999 he was awarded the University of Cape Town's Distinguished Teacher Award.

For sentient beings and for us humans especially, is life bad? According to South African philosopher, David Benatar, the answer is a resounding "Yes." Life is bad...so bad that it would be better if all sentient beings ceased with reproduction and went extinct after the current generation dies out. This view on procreation is called anti-natalism and is often met with a visceral reaction in most people that learn of it. But, is it really so off target as to be insane, as most people assert or is it a completely rational and logical way in which clear headed people can and should view our lives and the world that we inhabit? Benatar argues that there are scientific reasons that we overestimate the quality of our lives. In this book, he argues brilliantly, in my opinion, that procreation is not only irrational but it is immoral as well. He holds a candle for the "Pro-death" movement in that he believes women are morally obligated to abort their fetuses at the earliest stages of gestation. The visceral reaction that most people have to his view point is easily explainable, according to Benatar; humans have evolved over billions of years to be optimists. This is the way in which we survive as a species and it blinds us to the reality of our lives. In short, humans are delusional about their condition because nature makes us this way. This is very unfortunate, according to Benatar, because it leads us to the creation of new lives and new suffering. Why is life so bad? Well, according to Benatar, even the most privileged and gifted lives are full of suffering and hardship. Humans are "centers of suffering" according to Benatar and we don't even realize it due to our optimism bias instilled by nature. Benatar claims that most people spend a large part of their lives lonely, sad, hungry, thirsty, tired, depressed, anxious, nervous, embarrassed, in physical or emotional discomfort or otherwise suffering in some way. He believes that all pleasures are negative

in character; that is, it is a relief from some pain that we are in. Benatar argues that pain is much more intense than pleasure. He holds that no one alive would take the option of an hour of pure pleasure if it was followed by an hour of the worst pain imaginable. Pain is also much easier for people to "catch" than pleasure. For example, everyone has heard of chronic pain but no one has heard of chronic pleasure. It only takes a moment for someone to be seriously injured in an accident that lasts a lifetime but it is impossible for someone to catch a type of pleasure which is as intense or lasts as long. Benatar implores us to observe the bad in the world we live in. Some facts he presents: There are currently 7 billion people on the planet and that number is expected to skyrocket in the coming decades. Over the past 1,000 years, 15 million people are estimated to have died in natural disasters. Approximately 20,000 people in the world die from starvation every day. The 1918 Influenza epidemic killed 50 million people. HIV kills 3 million people annually. 3.5 million people die each year in accidents. Wars have killed hundreds of millions of people. When the numbers were put together for the year 2001, 56.5 million people died. That is more than 107 people per minute. As the world population increases, the amount of death and suffering only magnifies. One thing that we humans are guaranteed is death. We all will die, either through the natural aging process or through a disease or accident that take us out prematurely. Our physical prime is only a tiny part of our life and the rest is our gradual, if not steep, decline. We are not guaranteed any pleasures at all. A potential parent should view themselves as the top of a pyramid, according to Benatar. As that parent creates more humans, they create more suffering and pain that is easily avoidable. If each parent has 3 children, that amounts to more than 88,000 humans over ten generations. To Benatar, that is a lot of pointless suffering that could easily be avoided if we would all just use birth control or have early term abortions. Part of the brilliance of Benatar's book is that he anticipates the readers objections and responds to them with clear and sound logic. The first argument against Benatar's views on life is that there are good parts of life that Benatar chooses to ignore; Benatar agrees with this but argues that the bad outweighs the good by a large margin. His key argument against reproduction is his asymmetry argument; that is that pain is bad and pleasure is good. The best lives contain a lot of pain and pleasure as well, but, had we not existed, we would not have been deprived of pleasures. Only living beings can be deprived of pleasures, no one that does not exist can ever be deprived. When one does not exist, one does not feel pain, which is good and one does not feel pleasure, which is not bad, since one does not exist. Simply put, non existence means no suffering and no deprivation. Therefore, never existing is better than existing, considering all the suffering that humans must endure. Benatar urges us to look at Mars as an example. There is no suffering on Mars because there is no sentient life there. The Earth, however,

is full sentient life and suffering. There is no pleasure on Mars but this matters not since there are no Martians alive to be deprived. Do we Earthlings ever look to Mars and bemoan the lack of pleasure that Martians do not have since they do not exist? Of course we don't. However, if Martians were alive and suffered as we humans do, we would certainly deplore their condition. One argument that always comes up against anti-natalism is the reaction that anyone that promotes it, such as Benatar, should commit suicide. Benatar does address suicide and believes that it is an option, but it should be used only as a last resort after one discusses it with many people. In general, he is against suicide because it not only causes the suicidee harm, it also causes harm to people around that person, including their family and those that care about them. Anti-natalism is not the belief that we should all commit suicide, but rather that we should analyze reproduction and our lives and come to the conclusion that we should not create more pointless suffering by creating new humans. Every person, even those opposed to anti-natalism, can agree that having a child is essentially rolling the dice with another person's life, without their consent. None of us can see into the future; the future that involves our future children may indeed be grim. Reproduction is a form of Russian roulette, according to Benatar. For example, in the United States, 1 out of 4 women in America is raped during her lifetime. That means, if we have 2 daughters, there is a 50% chance that one of them will be raped. Knowing this, is it moral for humans to go ahead and create those daughters? Benatar believes that is it morally wrong to do so. I loved this book. It can be dense at times as there is a ton of information in each paragraph; some parts of it can be hard to understand. That being said, this book is important and I don't see how Dr. Benatar's thesis can be refuted.

A must read for those who doubt the benefit of living in the world. This will help you to get a better perspective about the peer pressures to accept life w/o question.

Benatar presents a surprising, original argument on a topic that has not been adequately addressed since the recent-ish invention of effective birth control and safe abortion. Now that the creation of a new life is a choice and not a gift/curse from Nature or the deity you happen to chill out with, how should we approach this choice? Benatar presents the argument that it is always harmful to create a new being who never asked to be here and will without doubt suffer greatly in this world. Many people find this statement upsetting or painful to encounter; Benatar presents his argument in a style uncommon among American philosophers (but happily more common to the rest of the British diaspora), that is, accessible, readable, and engaging. He is no nihilist and even dedicates his book to his parents and brother! It would be wonderful if this book were more widely read and the issue it

addresses more widely considered. Benatar's contribution is most welcome.

I'd like to start by saying that I don't necessarily agree with all the assumptions on which Mr. Benatar builds his conclusions. That being said, this is a very well-written book that makes the bold attempt of objectively quantifying all of the positives and negatives of existence with the purpose of concluding whether or not existence is worthwhile and whether procreation is an ethically good or evil act (spoiler alert - the title of the book is also the conclusion). And although I don't necessarily agree with all of his assumptions, I will say that he addresses specific things that would be uncomfortable for most, but that are definitely worth addressing. Perhaps not this book itself, but some abridged version of it, should be required reading in high school or for anyone considering having children, so that they can at least dwell for themselves on the concepts presented within.

Intellectually and emotionally stunning. A masterful argument against having children. David Benatar writes beautifully, with skill, grace, and wisdom rich with empathy.

Excellent read about the harsh realities of our existence and what we should do about it. He takes an intellectually arrogant tone against breeders and optimists, who either put no thought into procreation or justify it with faulty cognitive distortions. Some of the book is a bit technical but overall it should be comprehended by any intelligent person who has taken a college Philosophy course. Highly recommended.

Seldom will you find a philosopher who can write this well for laypersons with the courage to advance such a counterintuitive thesis. While people may find Benatar's conclusion repugnant (i.e. coming into existence is always a harm and extinction of the human race should be desired end), it is exceedingly difficult to find any flaw in his logic. This is a great piece of work and philosophically sound. While it may have been better that Benatar had never been, I am sure glad that he is being.

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