This is the penultimate version of Iddo Landau, “Benatar on the Badness of All Human Lives,” *Philosophia* 49(1) 2021: 333–345. DOI 10.1007/s11406-020-00207-4

[p. 333] Benatar on the Badness of All Human Lives

Abstract

This paper presents a critique of David Benatar's arguments on the badness of all human lives. I argue that even if Benatar is right that there is an asymmetry between the good and the bad in life so that each "unit" of bad is indeed more effective than each "unit" of good, lives in which there is a lot of good and only little bad are still overall good. Even if there are more unfulfilled than fulfilled desires in life, a distinction should be drawn between desires to fulfill important goals and desires to fulfill trivial ones, and Benatar's claim is untrue of the former. Benatar's claim that we cannot really know that the quality of our own lives is good is problematic, but even if it were true, it would not show that we cannot estimate correctly the quality of other people’s lives, which is the point at issue.

In his *The Human Predicament* (2017), David Benatar provides many original and sophisticated arguments for the claim that *all* human lives are bad. As he sees it, "even the best lives . . . contain more bad than good," and "while some lives are better than others, none are (noncomparatively or objectively) good" (2017, 2, 67).[1] He uses this claim to support a view that bears important practical implications: that for *all* people it [p. 334] would be better not to have come into existence and, hence, that it is morally wrong to procreate (2017, xii, 10).[2] In what follows, I address Benatar's

[1] Benatar (2017, 66–67) emphasizes that he is not using “good lives” and “bad lives” as comparative terms. Indeed, discussing the goodness of life only comparatively would restrict him to judgments such as “A’s life is better/worse than B’s life,” without allowing him to reach conclusions about their goodness or badness simpliciter. In my critique of Benatar, I too, of course, follow him in not using “good lives” and “bad lives” as merely comparative terms.

[2] Benatar presents his anti-natalist arguments from the general badness of all human lives as independent of his main anti-natalist argument, which has come to be called the asymmetry argument and is defended in another book of his (Benatar 2006, 28–49). The asymmetry

arguments on the low quality and badness of life (as distinct from his arguments concerning the meaninglessness of life and death), presented in chapter 4 of his book. I will argue that these arguments are insufficient to support his claim on the badness of *all* people's lives.

Criticizing Benatar's arguments for the badness of *all* human lives does not entail the acceptance of the opposite view, namely that all lives are good. I hold that some lives are good, some are bad, and some are somewhere in the middle. Benatar's position, then, is more demanding and ambitious than mine, as he presents a universal claim. Since I claim in this paper that only some lives are good, my position is more moderate and, thus, easier to defend. In this paper I will focus only on the lives I take to be good, and I will not discuss others. I will refer to people who have such lives as *good lifers*.[3] I will not try to define what good lifers are. Instead, I will present some of their characteristic qualities. The lives of good lifers are those commonly seen as good. These lives typically do not include severe chronic pain, whether physical or emotional. People who have such lives typically enjoy some good, close relationships with some other people, such as family members, lovers, or good friends. They have food and shelter and generally enjoy personal and some financial security. They are productive at work, which they find generally appealing. They find many things interesting. From time to time they have enjoyable aesthetic experiences. They succeed in fulfilling many of their important goals in life and generally appreciate significant aspects of their lives. They are, typically, healthy and moral. They have, as

---

argument has already been criticized by a number of scholars (see, e.g., Harman 2009; McMahan 2009; Metz 2011; Weinberg 2012; and Vohánka 2019; for some replies see Benatar 2012; 2013) and will not be dealt with here.

[3] For an earlier discussion of a group of people whose lives are very good see Vohánka's notion of *blessed people* (2019, 88–90).

a default, a good physical and emotional background feeling, even before one considers specific, stronger pleasures or pains that are added to this background feeling. This does not mean, of course, that good lifers have perfect lives. Good lifers, too, are sometimes bored, lonely, sad, depressed, sick, and in pain. In some spheres, and at some times, things go less well than in others. Statistically, in old age, these latter, unpleasant aspects of life are more common. But overall, most of their lives are close to what is described above. The typification of good lifers presented here is unlikely to be controversial and does not affect the argument of this paper. Today, at least in many industrialized countries, there are many people who could plausibly be characterized in this way. However, note that even if there are only few good lifers—moreover, even if there is only one—then Benatar's universal claim, which is supposed to hold for *all* lives, is incorrect.

To follow Parfit's (1984, 493–502) classification, good lifers' lives would be considered as good under hedonistic theories, desire fulfillment theories, and objective list theories. Their lives include more, longer, and more intense positive mental states than negative mental states; most of the important desires of good lifers are fulfilled; and their lives contain a lot of objective goods and only a few objective bads. The large [p. 335] quantity of philosophical theories of the good life according to which some people's lives can be good suggests that the burden of proof for the claim that *no* lives are good is on Benatar, so that if his arguments fail we have a prima facie reason to hold that some lives are good. However, independently of this consideration, I will argue here that some of the very arguments that Benatar presents for the badness of all lives not only do not show that all lives are bad but, under closer examination, show that some lives are good.

1 Asymmetry Between the Good and the Bad

One of Benatar's arguments for the badness of all people's lives relies on the asymmetry between the good and the bad in life.[4] Benatar points out, for example, that intense pleasures, such as orgasms, are short-lived, while intense pains, such as backaches, can be enduring. This is also true of non-intense pleasures and pains: we hear of chronic pains, but not of chronic pleasures. Furthermore, the worst pains are more terrible than the best pleasures are wonderful: we would not opt for an hour of the worst pains even if thereby we could enjoy an hour of the greatest pleasures. Another facet of the asymmetry is that we can be harmed in an instant, but healing takes much more time, and while everything that is healed can probably be harmed, some harms, such as many cases of cancer or dementia, cannot be healed (2017, 77). It is generally easier to harm than to heal, to destroy than to build, and for things to go wrong than to go right. Hence, commonly, positive states are less stable than negative states.

Grant the claim about the general asymmetry between the good and bad in life. But this asymmetry does not show that the best lives cannot nevertheless be good. This is so because there can be lives, such as those of the good lifers, in which there is a lot of good and only a little bad, so that although each "unit" of bad in them is more "effective" than each "unit" of good, these lives are still overall good. For example, suppose that in the life of a certain person, call her Anna, there happen to be many powerful pleasures and only a few, weak, brief pains. Although Benatar may be right that pleasures are, in general, shorter-lived than pains, Anna's life overall may still be more pleasurable than painful. This continues to hold even when we consider other

[4] Benatar's arguments about the asymmetry between the good and the bad in life, discussed in his *The Human Predicament* (2017) and criticized here, should be distinguished from his *asymmetry argument* in his *Better Never to Have Been* (2006), which is not discussed here.

aspects of the asymmetry between pleasure and pain, such as that the worst pains are more terrible than the best pleasures are wonderful. It is true that, because of this asymmetry, Anna would not opt for experiencing an hour of the worst pains in order to enjoy an hour of the greatest pleasures. But this still does not change the fact that in her life there is a lot of pleasure and only very little pain. The same is also true for the other asymmetries mentioned above: although Benatar is right that harming is usually easier and quicker than healing, Anna's life, as are the lives of other good lifers, is still more pleasurable than painful. What has been argued here of pleasure and pain similarly holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other aspects of good and bad lives.

[p. 336] Hence, Benatar's claim that "there is much more bad than good even for the luckiest of humans" (2017, 77) seems incorrect. Perhaps it is true that there is more *potential* bad than *potential* good even for the luckiest of humans, in the sense that the world and our psyches are built in such a way that bad aspects have some advantage. But the claim is untrue if it is understood in the sense that *all* lives are *actually* more bad than good. The general asymmetry between bad and good in life does not show that good lifers don't have good lives. On the contrary, according to the criteria for good and bad lives that Benatar presents in this argument (e.g., amount and degree of pleasures vs. pains, joy vs. suffering, being harmed vs. being healed), the best lives, or good lifers' lives, are good.

2 Pains and Inconveniences

To argue that all human lives are bad, Benatar also mentions the extremely painful and harmful experiences that some people suffer. For example, he discusses the tortures that people who endure burns undergo, the anguish of quadriplegics, the pains of cancer patients, and the sufferings of those who have severe mental disease such as

depression (2017, 73–76). However, although it is difficult to determine precise resilience rates (Infurna and Luthar 2016), some people who go through such extremely difficult ordeals can still, all in all, have good lives; notwithstanding the suffering they undergo, which is often very harsh indeed, some people have the power to withstand it, rebuild themselves, become happy again, focus on what is of worth, and react to the tragic aspects of life with courage and greatness of spirit. Some even experience after such difficult events post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004; Turner, Hutchinson, and Wilson 2018). But I note all this only in passing, since the critique of this argument by Benatar need not rely at all on resilience and post-traumatic growth: as mentioned above, this paper focuses on good lifers, that is, those who have not had the difficult experiences Benatar describes. On the contrary, good lifers have some deeply good, fulfilling experiences that Benatar does not discuss. If bad experiences such as those Benatar discusses are supposed to make lives bad, then the opposite, good experiences typical of the best lives will make good lifers' lives good.

Although he elaborates on such difficult experiences, Benatar accepts (2017, 77) that not all people face them. But he points out that all people do have to go through some minor discomforts. Here are some examples: the discomfort of being somewhat hungry and thirsty until the next meal starts; the need to empty one's bladder and bowels; the feeling that one's environment is too hot or cold (typically before one turns on the air conditioning or heat, or puts on a jacket); and the sensation of fatigue for part of the day. Further examples of such discomfort are itches, allergies, minor illnesses (such as colds), irritations felt when standing in line, and coping with bureaucracy (2017, 71–72).

However, at least for some people, these inconveniences are insufficient to make life overall bad. In the lives of good lifers, the good aspects of life, such as intense love, strong friendship, wide knowledge, satisfying aesthetic experiences, achievement, fulfillment, sexual pleasures, moral worth, moral gratification, and a default good physical and mental background feeling, would outweigh these small inconveniences. These inconveniences (which Benatar himself characterizes as only "minor"), then, are [p. 337] insufficient to override the many robust good aspects of good lifers' lives and do not turn them into bad lives.[5]

Benatar argues that although these inconveniences are minor, they are still consequential in that

> these discomforts all tend to be dismissed as minor matters. While they are minor relative to the other bad things that befall people, they are not inconsequential. A blessed species that never experienced these discomforts would rightly note that if we take discomfort to be bad, then we should take the daily discomforts that humans experience more seriously than we do (2017, 72).

However, we should distinguish between two senses of "consequential" (and, therefore, of "inconsequential"). One sense of "consequential" is "having some consequences." Another is "having serious, significant consequences that may tip the scales." It is, of course, true that minor discomforts are consequential in the first sense, since they do have some consequences. However, this does not show that they

[5] Some inconveniences may even be seen as *enhancing* the lives of good lifers, who may need to experience some inconvenience in order to truly appreciate the good things in life.

are also consequential in the second sense, relevant to the argument, having to do with serious, harmful consequences that can tip the scales from good to bad. On the contrary, it is plausible to see such minor discomforts as inconsequential (in the second, relevant sense). This seems to be the case whether it is we humans or the members of the blessed species that Benatar mentions that are considering these minor discomforts in the lives of good lifers, lives that also include many important favorable aspects.

Benatar also discusses some negative aspects of life that do not easily fall into any of the previous categories. For example, he notes that after our early twenties we decline in many ways (2017, 78–79). This, too, however, is insufficient to show that all lives, including those of good lifers, are bad; even if we were to grant that in all spheres of life there is a slow decline from our twenties onward, that would not show that all lives are *overall* bad. For many people life is good overall since it includes many weighty positive aspects and only few relatively unimportant negative aspects, even if over the years the good aspects become a little weaker and the bad ones a little stronger. According to the criteria for bad and good lives that Benatar employs in his argument (e.g., inconveniences vs. conveniences, bad and difficult experiences vs. good and enjoyable ones), good lifers' lives are indeed good.

3 Fulfilled and Unfulfilled Desires

Another argument for the badness of all people's lives is that there are more unfulfilled than fulfilled desires in life (Benatar 2017, 79). Unlike the argument from extremely painful experiences, and like the argument from minor discomforts, this argument, too, seems to apply to all people, including good lifers. However, it seems incorrect that people's lives always, or even typically, include more unfulfilled desires

than fulfilled ones. As Jason Marsh (2014, 13) points out, "billions of people want to spend time with [p. 338] their families, to talk to their friends, and to enjoy stories, music, good meals and the outdoors [and do so] . . .. In fact, even if we just focused on our capacity to think about what we want to, this alone leads to billions of satisfied desires everyday and could alone outnumber most frustrated desires."[6] Thus, if we rely on Benatar's criterion of fulfilled vs. unfulfilled desires, there seem to be many people whose lives are good.

Grant for the sake of argument, however, that all or many people's lives do in fact include more unfulfilled than fulfilled desires. Yet, when thinking about desires, we should take into account not only quantity but also quality. And when considering quality, we should distinguish between desires to fulfill important goals in life and desires to fulfill trivial goals in life. Suppose a person desires to fulfill some principal goals in her life, such as having an interesting and productive career; having a good, deep emotional relationship with a close person; acquiring some wisdom and knowledge; and having her position and achievements recognized. Suppose, also, that she has these central desires or goals fulfilled. Her not having fulfilled a large number of unimportant goals or desires, such as that of eating Chinese food rather than Italian tonight, or not missing the bus yet again, are less significant. As mentioned above, good lifers are people who have many of their important desires or goals in life fulfilled. If they also have many, or even more, unfulfilled desires for goals that are less important, this does not make their lives bad.

Thomas Alva Edison is said to have failed more than nine thousand times before he succeeded in developing an effective electric battery (Dyer and Martin

[6] Some (e.g., Pascal 1941, 50; Rousseau 1960, 68) have also held that pursuing goals or desires is a *better* condition than actually realizing them. But I will not follow here this line of argumentation.

2005, 373). Assume that this is indeed the case. Each time he failed, he probably experienced an unfulfilled desire. If we heed only the number of unfulfilled and fulfilled desires, around nine thousand to one, we should see Edison's process of inventing the battery as radically undermining the quality of his life. But this seems a wrong way to conceptualize the process and its effect on the quality of Edison's life. It is more plausible to conceive the process thus: Edison's central goal, or desire, was to develop an effective electric battery. If he failed in that, an important desire of his would have indeed remained unfulfilled. In each trial, he also had a less important desire, which was that he would develop a successful battery on that particular trial. But although many such less important desires did remain unfulfilled, the important one was fulfilled, and hence we conceive the process as having enhanced, rather than diminished, the quality of Edison's life. We should consider, then, not only quantitative but also qualitative factors when examining fulfilled and unfulfilled desires in life, and distinguish between desires to fulfill important goals and desires to fulfill unimportant ones.[7] When we bear this in mind we see that lives in which there are more unfulfilled than fulfilled desires may yet be good ones. People who have succeeded in fulfilling the important goals and desires in their lives should be seen, as far as goal and desire fulfillment are considered as the criteria of good and bad lives, to have had good lives. And since some people, such as the good lifers, have indeed fulfilled their important goals and desires, their lives should be seen as good.

[7] Edison is reported to have seen all these small failures as small successes: “I have gotten a lot of results! I know several thousand things that won’t work” (Dyer and Martin 2005, 373). But for the purpose of the present discussion, disregard his very positive description of his many failed efforts.

[p. 339] **4 Our Place on the Spectrum**

Benatar also discusses, however, a type of self "censorship" that people use when they formulate their desires, goals, and standards of a good life. He argues that there are many goals or standards, such as knowing everything, or living hundreds of years, that people do not endorse because they know that these goals are unattainable (or, perhaps, because of lack of imagination). If people were to endorse such higher goals and standards their lives would no longer seem to them good (2017, 80-81). Once we imagine much better lives than those we are used to, we can see that even the lives of good lifers are bad.

However, we can imagine not only much better lives but also much worse ones. People seem to employ what Benatar calls self "censorship" not only regarding much longer lives and much wider knowledge but also regarding much shorter lives and much narrower knowledge. People could have lived millions of years, but also only several minutes. They could have known everything, but also nearly nothing, having the knowledge of worms. In other ways, too, when it comes to forming our standards by considering other options, our standards and goals could move both upwards and downwards. We could, in principle, have lived in a heavenly state, but also in a hellish one, suffering forever in some of the horrendous conditions Dante describes in his *Inferno*. The argument that we should see good lifers' lives as bad since they could have been better is no stronger than the argument that we should see good lifers' lives (and much worse lives than theirs) as good since they could have been worse.

Benatar foresees this reply, and points out that "on the spectrum from no knowledge and understanding to omniscience, even the cleverest, best-educated humans are much closer to the unfortunate end of the spectrum" (81). However, this is

untrue of many of the other aspects of the quality of our lives. When it comes to extreme pain vs. extreme pleasure, for example, good lifers seem to be closer to the fortunate end of the spectrum. Good lifers' lives are closer to the fortunate rather than to the unfortunate end of the spectrum also in other important aspects of the good life such as being radically liked vs. being radically hated, being radically appreciated vs. being radically despised or humiliated, being radically jovial vs. being radically depressed, or experiencing radical beauty vs. experiencing radical ugliness and cacophony.

But it also seems incorrect that to decide whether a life is good we should check its position between the radical ends of various spectrums. There are many cases of *diminishing marginal utility* in which having the first unit of a certain good is more valuable to us than the addition of a second, the second more than the third, etc., so that the addition of the tenth or the hundredth unit hardly matters. In some cases, moreover, continued addition can even become excessive and *diminish* life's quality. In other words, in some cases more is not better.

We can see that it is problematic to decide the quality of people's lives by measuring their place along the spectrum between the best and worst possible imaginable options when we consider, for example, wealth. On one end of the spectrum we can think of people who own no property at all. On the other, we can think of a person who owns everything on the planet (or the cosmos). On the continuum between complete ownership and zero ownership, any person we would consider to be in a good economic condition is much closer to the zero-ownership end of the continuum. It seems wrong to suggest, however, that because of her distance from the complete- [p. 340] ownership end of the continuum, this person should be considered as being in a bad economic condition. Note that by Benatar's criterion a

multibillionaire like Warren Buffett, too, should be considered poor because, all his immense wealth notwithstanding, when all the wealth on earth is considered, Buffett's fortune is also closer to the zero-ownership end of the spectrum than to the complete-ownership end. But deciding whether Buffett's, or anyone else's, economic condition is good or bad should have little to do with his place along the spectrum between absolute, complete ownership of everything and of nothing. It is not self "censorship," lack of imagination, or deeming complete ownership unrealistic that leads us to see Buffett's economic condition as good. It is uncertain how to decide what a poor economic condition is: some economists have given considerable thought to characterizations of poverty (see, e.g., Sen 1976; Baulch and Masset 2003; Alkire, Foster, Seth, Santos, Roche, and Ballon 2015). Perhaps we should consult with them. But whatever the appropriate criteria are, relying on one's place along the spectrum between zero and everything is the wrong way to go.

Note, moreover, that if Benatar's argument here is to be consistent, it is not only human lives that it entails are bad, and hence perhaps should better not have been. Dogs, too, are not in as good a condition as we could possibly imagine them to be. Along many spectrums, their position, too, is closer to the zero end than to the everything end. By that I mean not only that many dogs are not as clever, heroic, or beautiful as the fictional Lassie or Rin Tin Tin supposedly are. Lassie and Rin Tin Tin are also very far from many extremely positive ends of scales that we might imagine. We could imagine them, too, as omniscient or as owning all the property in the world. This is true, of course, not only of dogs but also of zebras, elephants, dolphins, giraffes, chimpanzees, whales, deer, and any species whatsoever. According to this argument, we might be doing them a favor if we found a way to stop all of them from multiplying. Thus, we would soon have a very silent planet. Nor does this argument,

if applied consistently, need to stop with animals or even with sentient beings. It is also true of plant species, as well as of rocks and mountains, that they, too, could have been in various aspects of their existence much better than they in fact are and thus, perhaps, are bad. Benatar's argument, then, may also be problematic because it proves too much.

5 Psychological Empirical Research

Benatar also argues that people often deceive themselves about the quality of their lives. Their subjective views about the quality of their own lives are overly positive and do not give them sufficiently trustworthy information about their lives' real, objective quality. Their views about, for example, their own health, knowledge, honesty, social power, cleverness, attractiveness, or personal security cannot be relied upon. Hence, people should "distrust cheery subjective assessments about the quality of human life" (2017, 71).

One possible reply to Benatar might be that such self-deception, if it indeed occurs, is sufficient to make the quality of people's lives good. Indeed, Benatar himself mentions that seeing one's life as good may be beneficial (2017, 70). And if people who deceive themselves about various aspects of the quality of their lives feel contented, that may be enough for seeing their lives as of high quality. However, Benatar is [p. 341] likely to respond that a good life requires both a high objective quality of life and a high perceived quality of life; just a high perceived quality of life is insufficient (2017, 185-86; see also 229–30 n.43). Many agree with Nozick (1974, 42–45) that life in the experience machine would not be a good life (although it would feel like one). They don't want just to feel as if they wrote a good and important novel; they want actually to write one. Those who, like Benatar, are at least partly

objectivist about the goodness of life, then, will hold that if we deeply deceive ourselves, so that life is in fact much worse than we perceive it, it can't be seen as a good life.

Benatar bases his claims about the unreliability of people's evaluations of the goodness of life on empirical research in experimental psychology, and his discussion focuses on three main topics in that field. The first is the research on what has come to be called *unrealistic optimism* (also referred to as the *optimistic bias*), according to which people tend to have inaccurately favorable predictions about their own futures. For example, people tend to have overoptimistic assessments of their chances of finding a well-paying job or winning the lottery and to underestimate their chances of catching a cold or dying in a car accident. However, the accepted view in empirical psychology is that although unrealistic optimism skews assessments to a certain extent, making them somewhat rosier than they should be, it does not affect them so radically that they become uninformative or unhelpful. It is typical to find in the empirical psychological literature claims such as "although expectations often tend in the direction of optimistic bias, they are not out of touch with reality; they show relative, if not absolute, accuracy" (Taylor and Broffman 2011, 7). The research on unrealistic optimism suggests, then, that our predictions about ourselves are slightly unrealistic but far from being completely so; it does not show that our self-evaluations in this sphere are unreliable, only that they are not perfectly reliable. We should treat them with caution, perhaps diminishing our favorable impressions a bit and taking what seems excellent to be only very good or good. But we should not simply mistrust them, as if they were only hallucinations or dreams that have no relation with reality.

Unrealistic optimism is often considered to be just one of several aspects of what has come to be called in empirical psychology *positive illusion* (see, e.g., Taylor

and Brown 1988). Another aspect of positive illusion is, for example, people's tendency to believe that they have greater control than they in fact have. Yet another is people's tendency to self-aggrandize, that is, to perceive themselves in overly positive terms. However, in these other aspects of positive illusion, as with unrealistic optimism, empirical research does not hold that the bias is so sharp that self-appraisals are unreliable. One commonly finds in empirical psychology claims such as

> it is important to reiterate that the illusion of control typically represents a *mild* distortion in domains over which people actually have some control. *Like the other illusions*, the illusion of control is not typically held about things that are completely uncontrollable (although this condition has sometimes been created in certain laboratory studies). (Taylor and Brown 1994, 24; emphasis added)

[p. 342] Likewise, "Typically, these illusions remain mild because the social environment tolerates and fosters *modest* illusion but *not substantial degrees* of illusion."[8] But if people's illusions are typically mild or modest, then self-evaluations again emerge as, although not absolutely reliable, still quite reliable. Furthermore, this finding suggests that those who evaluate the quality of their lives as excellent probably have a very good or good quality of life. Since there is variation in the degree of mildness of illusion among groups, this conclusion has to be qualified: for those groups in which illusions are mild, self-evaluations are reliable and lives self-evaluated as excellent are probably very good or good. Thus, if we heed self-

[8] Taylor and Brown (1994, 24); emphasis added. One indication that many people's self-evaluations are not so wide off the mark that they should be distrusted is that many people, including people who have good views of their lives, function well in reality.

evaluations, the empirical research on which Benatar relies seems to undermine his thesis rather than confirm it. The type of consideration Benatar employs here suggests that, in fact, some lives are good.

Moreover, and as already noted by Vohánka (2019, 89), the empirical research on people's self-evaluations, on which Benatar elaborates, is irrelevant to many aspects of the topics he discusses. Put differently, even if what Benatar writes about the optimistic bias (and other constituents of positive illusion) were granted, it would not show that we should mistrust our evaluations of the quality of life of other people, such as those of good lifers. This is because the empirical psychological research he cites discusses only possible distortions of people's *self*-evaluations; it points at some problems in the way people judge the quality of *their own* lives. However, most of the discussion in Benatar's chapter relates to judgments of the quality of *other* people's lives. Even if we were to accept Benatar's claims about the unreliability of self-evaluations, then, they would not show that we should mistrust our evaluations of good lifers' lives. Of course, it might be objected here that this reply to Benatar's claim is problematic: how could a person A evaluate various aspects of the quality of a person B's life if not on the basis of B's self-evaluation of the quality of her own life? However, Benatar and the research in experimental psychology on unrealistic optimism on which he relies discuss aspects of quality of life that are accessible to all, such as people's actual IQ, knowledge, health, probability of dying in a car accident, likelihood of winning the lottery, or chances of finding a well-paying job.

The second topic of empirical research that Benatar discusses is that on the *hedonic treadmill* or *hedonic adaptation* (Benatar 2017, 68–69). Some research suggests that people whose quality of life is objectively diminished (e.g., by becoming paraplegic) or improved (e.g., by winning the lottery) return after about a year to the

same degree of subjective happiness they had before the objective quality of their life deteriorated or improved (Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman 1978). Benatar argues that this shows that people's evaluations of the objective quality of their own lives are unreliable; if these self-evaluations were reliable, the degree of subjective happiness would be affected by these objective deteriorations or improvements in the quality of their lives.

However, research on hedonic adaptation has presented rather mixed results. Many people do not adapt, or do not adapt fully (see, e.g., Diener, Lucas, and Scollon 2006, 309–311; Headey 2008; Mancini, Bonanno, and Clark 2011, 146–151). Thus, for many people, objective changes [p. 343] in the quality of life do in fact affect subjective happiness. Benatar notes this and replies,

> There is some disagreement about the extent to which we adapt. Some have suggested that it is complete—that we return to a baseline or "setpoint" level of subjective wellbeing. Others deny that the evidence shows this, at least not in every domain in our lives. However, there is no dispute that there is some adaptation and that it is sometimes significant. This is all that is required to lend support to the claim that our subjective assessments are unreliable. (2017, 69)

But it is unclear why some adaptation, which is sometimes significant, is sufficient to show that self-evaluations are unreliable. They are clearly not *absolutely* reliable, but that differs from being unreliable. Even if not absolutely reliable, self-evaluations can still be seen as providing a good indication of the real quality of our lives. Again, empirical research does not in fact show that we should just disregard evaluations of

our own lives as if they were completely uninformative, or treat them as having the epistemic reliability of dreams. Moreover, the research on hedonic adaptation, just like that on unrealistic optimism and other aspects of positive illusion, discusses only *self*-evaluations. (In fact, much of it does not even discuss self-evaluations, that is, judgments of various aspects of one's own quality of life, but only rates of the sensation of happiness or subjective contentment in life, which differ from *evaluations* of one's quality of life.) As above, even if hedonic adaptation rendered self-evaluations as unreliable as Benatar takes it to do, this would not undermine the reliability of people's evaluations of other people's lives, which is what is relevant here.

The third topic of empirical psychological research Benatar presents is *social comparison*. Benatar argues that our self-evaluations are unreliable because they "implicitly involve comparisons with the wellbeing of others" (2017, 69). The argument is that evaluations of one's own quality of life are affected by a tendency to compare oneself with other people. Evaluators who take others to be in a better condition than they are tend to evaluate the quality of their own life as worse than it really is, and evaluators who take others to be in a worse condition than they are tend to evaluate the quality of their own life as better than it really is.

However, this argument seems to contradict Benatar's earlier argument from hedonic adaptation, according to which winning the lottery or becoming a paraplegic does not affect people's self-evaluations. Surely, winning the lottery or becoming a paraplegic does affect people's comparisons of themselves with others, since their own situation changed while others' situation did not. Thus, according to this third argument from social comparison, winning the lottery or becoming a paraplegic *should* affect people's self-evaluation. The tension between these two arguments

needs to be explained. Furthermore, empirical psychological research in fact suggests that comparisons may, but need not, affect self-evaluations (see, e.g., Gilbert, Giesler, and Morris 1995). Thus, although comparisons with others may affect people's evaluations, they do not determine them completely. (For example, if, because of an epidemic, all people were incapacitated or in pain, their evaluations of the quality of their own lives would probably change even though *comparatively* they would all be in similar situations.) This again suggests, then, that although many people's self-evaluations may be compromised to an extent, they [p. 344] are not invalidated. And as above, this argument for the unreliability of our self-evaluations, even if granted, would only show that our evaluations of our own lives are unreliable but would not undermine the reliability of our evaluations of other people's lives. In other words, this argument, too, does not in itself give us reason to mistrust our view of the good quality of life of the good lifers.

Benatar is right to suggest that empirical psychological research shows that self-evaluations are not a hundred percent reliable. Moreover, it shows that self-evaluations are less reliable than most of us commonly take them to be. But this differs from showing that self-evaluations are not reliable enough to give many people a good indication of the quality of their own lives, and even more so, it differs from showing that people cannot evaluate the quality of other people's lives. We need not distrust our evaluations to the degree that we should completely suspend judgment about the quality of our own or others' lives. The degree of reliability of our evaluations is not that of dreams, fantasies, or hallucinations, which we can simply disregard as a source of information about reality. Note also that if we considered only a hundred percent reliability to be sufficient, it is not only people's evaluations of the quality of their own and others' lives that would have to be pronounced unreliable

but also almost any other evaluation or judgment that we make in philosophy (including Benatar's own philosophizing and the present reply to it), psychology, sociology, history, literature, and almost any other aspect of human consideration. All these spheres of knowledge, too, are partly affected by emotional and other biases.

We should of course be cautious and self-critical when considering the quality of lives, as we should be cautious and self-critical when considering most other issues. In a Popperian mood, this is an important part of being rational. It is wise to try to be as aware as possible of the possible influence of nonrational factors such as interests, biases, and emotions on our rational thought. But this does not show that nonrational factors are so strong, or so much stronger in this sphere than in others, that we should altogether mistrust our assessments of the quality of people's lives.

I suggest that none of Benatar's arguments discussed here, all of which are taken from chapter 4 of his book, succeed in showing that the quality of the lives of good lifers, or of all of the best lives, is bad. On the contrary, many of these arguments, when examined more closely, suggest that, in fact, the quality of some lives is good. Good lifers' lives continue to stand as an exception to Benatar's claim that all lives are bad. To the extent that Benatar's arguments about the badness of all lives are the basis for his anti-natalism, I believe that anti-natalism, too, is shaken; none of Benatar's arguments discussed here succeeds in showing that it would be better for good lifers not to have been born. In other chapters of his book Benatar presents other arguments, many of them, unlike those examined here, discussing other topics aside from the quality of life. I believe that there are good replies to those as well. But to do them justice will require a more elaborate discussion than space here permits.

Acknowledgments: An earlier version of this paper was read at the *Anti-Natalism under Fire* conference (Prague, May 30, 2018). I am grateful to the participants, and especially to David Benatar, for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to Sam Lebens, Saul Smilansky, and two anonymous referees for Philosophia for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

[p. 345] **References**

Alkire, S., Foster, J. E., Seth, S., Santos, M. E., Roche, J. M., & Ballon, P. (2015). *Multidimensional poverty measurement and analysis*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Baulch, B., & Masset, E. (2003). Do monetary and non-monetary indicators tell the same story about chronic poverty? A study of Vietnam in the 1990s. *World Development* 31(3), 441–453.

Benatar, D. (2006). *Better never to have been: The harm of coming into existence*. Oxford: Clarendon.

Benatar, D. (2012). Every conceivable harm. *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31(1), 128–164.

Benatar, D. (2013). Still better never to have been: A reply to (more of) my critics. *Journal of Ethics* 17(1–2), 121–151.

Benatar, D. (2017). *The human predicament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Brickman, P., Coates, D., & Janoff-Bulman R. (1978). Lottery winners and accident victims: Is happiness relative? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 36(8), 917–927.

Diener, E., Lucas, R. E., & Scollon, C. N. (2006). Beyond the hedonic treadmill: Revising the adaptation theory of well-being. *American Psychologist* 61(4), 305–314.

Dyer, F. L. & Martin, T. C. (2005). *Edison: His life and inventions*. New York: Barnes & Noble.

Gilbert, D. T., Giesler, R. B., & Morris, K. A. (1995). When comparisons arise. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69(2), 227–236.

Harman, E. (2009). Critical study: David Benatar *Better never to have been*. *Nous* 43(4), 777–782.

Headey, B. (2008). Life goals matter to happiness: A revision of set-point theory. *Social Indicators Research* 86(2), 213–231.

Infurna, F. J. & Luthar S. S. (2016). Resilience has been and will always be, but rates declared are inevitably suspect: Reply to Galatzer-Levy and Bonanno. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 11(2), 199–201.

Mancini, A. D., Bonanno, G. A., & Clark, A. E. (2011). Stepping off the hedonic treadmill: Individual differences in response to major life events. *Journal of Individual Differences* 32(3), 144–152.

Marsh, J. (2014). Quality of life assessments, cognitive reliability, and procreative responsibility. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 89, 436–466.

McMahan, J. (2009). Asymmetries in the morality of causing people to exist. In M. Roberts & D. Wasserman (Eds.), *Harming future persons* (pp. 49–68). New York: Springer.

Metz, T. (2011). Are lives worth creating? *Philosophical Papers* 40(2), 233–255.

Nozick, R. (1974). *Anarchy, state, and utopia*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pascal, B. (1941). *Pensées—The provincial letters*. Trans. W. F. Trotter. New York: Random House.

Rousseau, J.-J. (1960). *Julie ou la nouvelle Héloïse*. Paris: Garnier.

Sen, A. (1976). Poverty: An ordinal approach to measurement. *Econometrica* 44(2), 219–231.

Taylor, S. E., & Broffman, J. I. (2011). Psychological resources: Functions, origins, and links to mental and physical health. In J. M. Olson & M. P. Zanna (Eds.), *Advances in experimental social psychology* 44 (pp. 1–40). San Diego: Elsevier.

Taylor, S. E., & Brown, J. D. (1988). Illusion and well-being: A social psychological perspective on mental health. *Psychological Bulletin* 103(2), 193–210.

Taylor, S. E., & Brown, J. D. (1994). Positive illusions and well-being revisited: Separating fact from fiction. *Psychological Bulletin* 116(1), 21–27.

Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry* 15(1), 1–18.

Turner, J. K., Hutchinson, A., & Wilson, C. (2018). Correlates of post-traumatic growth following childhood and adolescent cancer: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psycho-Oncology* 27(4), 1100–1109.

Vohánka, V. (2019). Dismantling the asymmetry argument. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 53(1), 75–90.

Weinberg, R. (2012). Is having children always wrong? *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31(1), 26–37.