

# *Two Arguments for the Badness and Meaninglessness of Life*

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# Two Arguments for the Badness and Meaninglessness of Life

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## 1 Two Arguments for the Badness and Meaninglessness of Life

In a series of papers and books, David Benatar has argued that our lives, even if they seem to us to be good, are, in fact, bad.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, they are so bad that for all people, at all times, it would have been better for their own sake for them never to have come into existence at all. To prove his point, Benatar employs various arguments, in some of which he endorses much stricter standards for goodness or for the meaning of life than those that most people use. In this paper, I critique two groups of arguments in which Benatar defends his endorsement of stricter standards than those that are usually employed. In the first, Benatar asks us to evaluate our lives from the theoretical point of view of beings whose lives are better than ours. In the second, Benatar asks us to endorse standards according to which lives that do not affect the whole cosmos are insufficiently meaningful. I will examine each set of arguments in turn.

## 2 Identifying Other Species' Standards

Benatar asks us to hypothesize the existence of members of a blessed species whose lot is better than ours in various ways (e.g., they are not inconvenienced by what inconveniences us; they are more autonomous) and to adopt their more demanding standards in evaluating our own lives. Benatar does not, of course, suggest that such beings exist, but he holds that we can imagine their possible existence and identify what their standards would be. Since they would see relevant aspects of our lives as bad, so should we.

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<sup>1</sup> See David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006); "Every Conceivable Harm," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31 (2012): 128–164; "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics," *Journal of Ethics* 17 (2013): 121–151; *The Human Predicament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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Benatar employs this argument to discuss, first, some minor daily discomforts that almost all people experience. For example, almost all people sometimes feel the discomfort of being somewhat hungry and thirsty until the next meal begins; the discomfort of needing to empty their bladders and bowels; the feeling that their environment is slightly too hot or too cold (typically before one turns on the air conditioning or heat, or takes off a layer of clothing or puts on a coat); the sensation of fatigue in the latter part of the day; itches, allergies, and minor illnesses (such as colds); and irritations felt while waiting in line or coping with bureaucracy.<sup>2</sup> He knows that most people do not see these discomforts as serious. However, in his view, we should evaluate these discomforts by using other standards according to which the discomforts do indeed seem serious. These are the standards that other types of beings, not afflicted by such minor discomforts, would likely use to evaluate them. “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.”<sup>3</sup>

Benatar also asks us to adopt the standards of a luckier species when criticizing Wayne Sumner’s discussion of people’s quality of life.<sup>4</sup> Sumner bases his notion of the quality of life on people’s informed, autonomous subjective life satisfaction, and his standards for “informed” and “autonomous” are what can be met by most adults of normal intelligence. In order to undermine the plausibility of Sumner’s standard of autonomy, Benatar asks us to consider how members of a more autonomous species might consider our typical level of autonomy:

If there were a species that were as much more autonomous than us as we are than young children, they might well view the life satisfaction judgments of humans to fail the autonomy test (just as we think that young children fail the autonomy test). Indeed, they might point to the very psychological traits I have mentioned and cite these as evidence that humans are either ill-informed or do not autonomously process all relevant information in determining their life satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

While noting that he is “not purporting to provide a sufficiently detailed response” to Sumner, here, too, Benatar employs the standards of a luckier species—this time luckier in being more autonomous than we are—to suggest that our own standards are unreliable.

Benatar foresees a possible objection to his argument. This objection would claim that humans should be evaluated only by standards relating to the nature and capabilities of humans, not by standards relating to the nature and capabilities of other species. If what is true of the luckier species were true of humans, humans would not be human. In reply, Benatar asks us to imagine this time a *less* fortunate species than ourselves:

<sup>2</sup> Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 71–72.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> See Wayne Sumner, *Welfare, Happiness and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Benatar, op. cit., p. 230 n. 43.

The problem [with this objection] is that it fetishizes human life. . . . [C]onsider an imaginary species rather than humans. Members of this fictional species, which we might call *Homo infortunatus*, have an even more wretched quality of life than most humans have, but their lives are not devoid of all pleasure and other goods. Now imagine that a pessimistic philosopher among them . . . points to how much better things could be. For example, instead of living only thirty years, they might live to eighty or ninety. Instead of being in an almost constant state of hunger, they might get hungry only between three regular meals a day. . . . In response to such observations, the optimistic members of the species . . . object that if their lives were better in those ways, they would no longer be *infortunati*. That observation, even if true, would not detract from the claim that the quality of life of an *infortunati* is wretched.<sup>6</sup>

Call the species whose lot is better than ours *fortunati*, and the type of argument that suggests that our lives should be evaluated according to the more demanding standards typical of the fortunati the *fortunati argument*. The fortunati argument can be used, of course, to undermine not only our standards for the goodness or meaningfulness of life, but all standards that we employ in all spheres. We can always think of a more fortunate species whose members have more demanding standards than we do, and we can always be called on to adopt their standards instead of ours.

I suggest that the fortunati argument should be rejected because it relies on two problematic suppositions. The first is that the fortunati indeed hold standards according to which our lives are bad or insufficient. The second is that we should endorse the fortunati's standards rather than our own.

Consider the first. Benatar seems to assume that a species's standards are based on what is natural, common, and achievable for that species, so that whatever is less than what members of that species are used to or capable of would be considered by them bad. For example, if the fortunati were not used to any discomforts, they would consider even mild discomforts as making life bad. Likewise, if the fortunati were capable of a certain degree of autonomy, they would take a lower degree of autonomy to be bad or insufficient.

However, it is not at all clear that a species's standards are based on what is natural, common, and achievable for that species. We have never met fortunati and hence do not know what their standards are. But judging by the species of rational beings that we are familiar with, namely humans, Benatar's supposition seems incorrect. People often do not judge what is worse than what they have, or what is worse than what they are used to, as bad. For example, people in higher economic classes very often do not hold people in the middle economic classes to be in a bad economic condition. They see those of the middle class as having less money than they, but as being, nevertheless, in a sufficiently good economic condition. Some people in the upper class take even those of the lower economic classes to be in a sufficiently good economic condition. Likewise, many people who have a very high IQ do not think that all whose IQ is lower than theirs are stupid. They just hold that others have a

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 86–87.

good IQ, while they have an excellent IQ. (Of course, issues of emotional maturity and self-confidence are also relevant here.) What has been said here of wealth or IQ is true also of other qualities, such as beauty (those who are very beautiful often do not take all those less beautiful than they to be ugly or of insufficient beauty), happiness, knowledge, technical ability, health, etc.

Those who have higher wealth, IQ, happiness, etc., may not judge a situation that is worse than theirs to be bad even if they only consider the issue comparatively. But it is also possible that they might not consider the issue comparatively at all, employing noncomparative criteria instead. Take, again, Benatar's autonomy example. He hypothesizes that the difference between fortunati autonomy and human adult autonomy will be as large as the difference between human adult autonomy and human children's autonomy. Hence, he suggests that, according to fortunati standards, human adult autonomy will be as defective as we (adults) take children's autonomy to be.<sup>7</sup> But we do not judge children's autonomy to be defective just because there is a *difference* between their level of autonomy and ours. Instead, the reason that we judge children's autonomy to be defective is that we know that children, in many cases, simply behave in nonautonomous ways. If the difference between children and ourselves were just as large, but we observed that children usually behave autonomously, we would judge them to be sufficiently autonomous, and ourselves perhaps to be extremely autonomous. Similarly, the fortunati may well hold that our level of autonomy is sufficient, even if it is significantly lower than theirs, if they hold that a large proportion of our behavior is properly autonomous. Likewise, fortunati who suffer no discomforts will of course think that our condition is, comparatively speaking, worse than theirs, but at the same time they may judge that, because the minor discomforts do not cause us great suffering, and because they only slightly diminish our ability to do valuable things in life (e.g., love, understand, have aesthetic experiences), these minor inconveniences are not really serious and do not render human life bad.

The same holds for *our* view of the *infortunati*, who, as Benatar describes them, are in a state of almost constant hunger.<sup>8</sup> We may well hold that their lives are bad not because our bellies are fuller than theirs, but *because it is bad to be hungry*; it is a torturous condition that leads to weakness and a significantly diminished ability to do what is pleasant and meaningful in life. We would likely see the hungry condition of the *infortunati* as bad even if we had no advantage over them in this respect and were as hungry as they are (as, unfortunately, many people in the world today indeed are).

Note that the position presented here is not symmetrically opposite to Benatar's; while Benatar claims that the fortunati evaluate our lives as bad, I am not claiming that they evaluate our lives as good. My point, rather, is that we have no way to tell what the fortunati's standards would be and, hence, how they would evaluate our lives. We cannot infer from the advantages that various beings have over us how they would judge us nor, more generally, can we infer

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 229–230 n. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 86–87.

from the nature and capabilities of various beings what standards they would endorse. It is also probable that the fortunati would not all share one agreed-upon code of standards; different fortunati would likely endorse different standards, just as we, various members of the human species, also hold a variety of standards. Moreover, different species of fortunati may well also endorse even more widely varying sets of standards.

### 3 Should We Adopt the Fortunati's Standards?

However, let us suppose, for the sake of argument, that we *can* be certain that the fortunati would indeed endorse standards according to which our lives are meaningless, bad, or insufficient. I believe that the fortunati argument will still falter, because it also relies on a second problematic supposition, namely that we humans should adopt the standards of the fortunati.

Benatar does not explain why we should prefer the standards of the fortunati to our own. We do not usually accept the standards of those more fortunate than us just because they are more fortunate. Consider a slight alteration of an example suggested in the previous section: I argued there that people of higher economic classes may or may not hold that those of the middle class are in a bad economic condition. Suppose, however, for the sake of argument, that people of the upper class do indeed all think exactly that. Perhaps some of the upper (or upper upper) class are even convinced that a life without a private jet, caviar, and servants is intolerable. But in reply we can then point out that members of the middle class need not accept these standards. Likewise, it may be that some people with a very high IQ do indeed hold that you and I are idiots. But it is unclear why you and I need to accept their standards. And if some extremely healthy and fit people decide that you and I are not only less healthy and fit than they, but are just sick, then again, we may well reject these evaluations.

Nor is it clear why we should prefer the standards of the fortunati over those of the infortunati. Just as the fortunati, per Benatar's supposition, endorse more demanding standards than ours and see our lives as bad, so too do the infortunati, also per Benatar's supposition, endorse less demanding standards than ours and see our lives as good. If the infortunati always experience great inconvenience and pains, or are significantly less autonomous than we are, they may think that our minor discomforts are inconsequential and that our autonomy is fine. Benatar provides no reason why we should endorse the standards of the fortunati but reject those of the infortunati.

As I pointed out earlier, it is not at all clear that other species would endorse standards according to which our lives are bad. But even if they did endorse standards according to which our lives were bad, it is not clear what reason there is to prefer their standards over ours (or over the standards of other hypothetical species). Thus I suggest that the fortunati argument, in its present state, falters, whether applied to the meaning and goodness of our lives or to any other evaluative issue.

## 4 Terrestrial and Cosmic Meaning

In another group of arguments for endorsing more demanding standards than those we usually use, Benatar identifies meaning in life with having an impact on others, serving purposes beyond oneself, leaving a mark, and attaining goals.<sup>9</sup> When people evaluate meaning in their lives they often consider whether they are having an impact on others, serving purposes, leaving marks, or attaining goals in their immediate environment (e.g., their family, friends, workplace, and neighborhood). However, Benatar points out, the cosmos is immense and includes many things on which we have no impact, on which we do not leave marks, and concerning which we do not serve any purposes or attain any goals. Most people do not hold the standard according to which lives that do not affect, leave marks on, etc. the whole cosmos are insufficiently meaningful. But this is the standard for sufficient meaning in life that Benatar asks us to accept.

Benatar distinguishes between what he calls “terrestrial meaning,” which is the meaning that can be had by affecting, leaving a mark on, etc., things here on earth, and what he calls “cosmic meaning,” which is the meaning that can be had by affecting, leaving a mark on, etc., the whole cosmos at large.<sup>10</sup> When people consider things in their immediate environment, they consider them, in Benatar’s terminology, “*sub specie humanitatis*,” adopting what might be called a “terrestrial perspective.” When people think of the many things in the vast cosmos, however, they consider them, in Benatar’s terminology, “*sub specie aeternitatis*,” adopting what he calls a “cosmic perspective” or “the perspective of the cosmos.”<sup>11</sup> When people see things from the cosmic perspective, *sub specie aeternitatis*, they become aware of the many things that they do not and cannot affect, leave marks on, etc. Benatar holds that not affecting, etc., most of the universe considerably damages the meaning of life. He accepts that it does not obliterate meaning completely, since people can still affect, etc., their immediate environment. But according to him, people’s inability to affect, etc., the whole of the universe seriously undercuts meaning in life and is part of the human predicament. It is a regrettable defect in the meaning of people’s lives, rendering it insufficient and unsatisfactory: “there is a serious deficit in meaning even if our lives are not without some (terrestrial) meaning. The terrestrial meaning is good, but the absence of cosmic meaning is bad.”<sup>12</sup>

But how does Benatar support the claim that a life that does not have an impact on the whole universe is of insufficient meaning? First, Benatar identifies affecting the whole universe with other, commonly accepted, conditions for meaningfulness. Thus, he identifies affecting the whole cosmos with giving life a purpose, with providing “a point to the entire species and its continued existence,” and with not being just “a cog in the machinery of a pointless enterprise.”<sup>13</sup> However, these are distinct

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 22, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., pp. 50, 62. See also pp. 61, 63.



issues. Benatar nowhere explains *how*, or *why*, affecting distant stars in distant galaxies gives life a purpose, provides a point to the entire species and its continued existence, or saves one from being a cog in the machinery of a pointless enterprise. Nor does he explain why activities such as writing novels, developing warm emotional relationships, and enjoying aesthetic, intellectual, and mystical experiences are insufficient to provide life with adequate purpose, do not provide a point to the entire species and its continued existence, and do not save one from being just a cog in a pointless enterprise. But until it is shown why having an impact on dead matter on distant stars gives life its purpose or point while love, knowledge, beauty, authenticity, honesty, etc. do not, this argument for the claim that a life that does not affect the whole universe is insufficiently meaningful remains problematic.

Second, Benatar discusses transcending limits as important for having a sufficiently meaningful life.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps by “transcending limits” he means “going beyond one’s former limitations.” However, even if “transcending limits” is understood in this way, and it is granted that it is necessary to transcend limits in order to have sufficient meaning in life, this does not show that we need to have an impact on the whole cosmos in order to have sufficiently meaningful lives. One can transcend one’s own former limits by just making more of an impact than one had done earlier, but still without having an impact on the whole cosmos.

## 5 We Do Not Need to Impact the Whole Universe In Order to Have Sufficiently Meaningful Lives

I have failed to identify in Benatar’s text any further arguments for the claim that a life that does not affect the whole universe is of insufficient meaning. In what follows, however, there are some arguments against this claim.

a. According to Benatar’s standard, in order to have a sufficiently meaningful life, affecting others, leaving a mark, serving purposes beyond oneself, and attaining goals must occur to their fullest possible extent (i.e., on a cosmic scale). But as far as meaning in life is concerned, it is commonly considered that conditions for meaningfulness need *not* appear to their fullest extent. For example, those who think that a meaningful life must include love do not hold that a life in which one does not love everyone is insufficiently meaningful. Those who hold that a meaningful life must involve contribution do not hold that a life that does not contribute to everyone is insufficiently meaningful. This is true also of the other qualities: those who think that meaning in life must have to do with innovation or creation do not hold that, in order to have meaningful lives, people must have been responsible for all the innovations or have created everything that exists. Those who believe that meaningful lives must involve wealth do not lament as insufficiently meaningful the lives of people who do not own all the wealth on the planet. And those who hold that meaningful lives must have to do with social influence do not see lives that do not socially influence all people in the world as of insufficient meaning.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 18–19, 31, 54–56.

b. Even if having an impact on the whole cosmos were to enhance meaning in life, this would not show that refraining from doing so makes life insufficiently meaningful. We recognize, when considering value, a gradation from the superb to the insufficient, that is, a scale of varied degrees such as superb, exceptionally good, very good, good, sufficient, and insufficient. (The gradation continues to negative categories such as bad, very bad, exceptionally bad, and terrible, but these need not concern us here.) What is not superbly intelligent need not be insufficiently intelligent; what is not superbly large need not be insufficiently large; etc. Similarly, even if it were superbly meaningful to have an impact on stars in distant galaxies, refraining from doing so need not render life insufficiently meaningful. Benatar seems to completely ignore the distinctions among what is superb and what is exceptionally good, very good, good, etc. It appears that, for him, anything that is not superb is insufficient. But this overlooks much of the evaluative scale.

We are also familiar with the supererogatory sphere in ethics: it is commonly held that doing what goes *beyond* moral duty (as Mother Teresa did, for example) makes one morally excellent or saintly, yet that refraining from excelling as much as Mother Teresa did does not make one morally defective. Those who do as much as Mother Teresa gain a superb moral status, but those who do not may still be exceptionally good people, and even those who are not exceptionally good yet fulfill regular moral duties may still not be of defective or insufficient moral status; their moral status may be very good. Again, then, even if it were accepted that having an impact on distant stars in distant galaxies somehow enhanced meaning, doing so could be seen as supererogatory as regards meaning in life. Doing so would enhance meaning to a superb level, but refraining from doing so need not render the meaning in a life insufficient.

c. As far as we know, the cosmos beyond planet Earth consists merely of huge quantities of dead matter. It is unclear why having an impact on immense masses of stones and sand would be valuable and add to life's meaning. What has been said here about the value of having an impact on a lot of dead matter also applies, of course, to the other activities Benatar mentions, such as serving purposes beyond oneself, leaving a mark, and attaining goals in huge masses of dead matter.

d. Benatar's argument seems to suppose that people have some kind of an obligation to make an impact on everything that exists, so that if they do not do so, something valuable has been lost and the meaning of their lives is damaged. But it is not commonly supposed that something wrong has happened if people have not had an impact on something, or on everything, that exists in the cosmos, or on Earth, or even in their own neighborhood. For example, people may plausibly assume that at any given time there may well be someone in their neighborhood reading a book or washing dishes whom they do not affect. But for most people, this does not pose any problem and they do not even want to affect the neighbor who is reading a book or washing dishes; as far as they are concerned, the reading or dishwashing can continue in peace. Likewise, people know that in their neighborhood there are tables, pencils, houses and blades of grass on which they are having no impact. But again, most people do not want to affect all those tables, pencils, etc., and do not suppose that this unaffected existence diminishes the meaning in their lives. People know that they do not affect everything even in their very own neighborhood without feeling

frustrated or disturbed by this fact, without feeling an urge to have an impact on all things, and without holding that there is anything wrong, or insufficiently meaningful, in that. But this, too, clashes with Benatar's claim.

e. It is difficult to explain why it might be important even for some people to affect the whole universe. The few people who do state that they would like to have this kind of impact find it very hard to explain clearly their reasons. They often agree that, as noted in (c) and (d) above, having an effect on huge masses of dead matter would not be particularly valuable, and they also agree that they recognize no interest in affecting everything even in their own neighborhood. Sometimes they mention an egotistic motivation; being able to affect a huge quantity of things promotes the ego. And in fact, some degree of ego promotion is probably natural and plausible. But the need for boundless promotion of the ego by making a massive impact does not sound healthy or commendable, and would seem to differ from what is commonly taken to be valuable and meaningful in a life. Again, Benatar's standard for sufficient meaningfulness clashes with the way in which meaningfulness is commonly understood.

It might be replied here that the wish for a cosmos-scale impact is linked to wanting people and animals not to suffer. But this motivation seems irrelevant for most of the cosmos, which seems to be made up merely of great masses of dead matter. Moreover, wanting suffering to be diminished or eradicated is different from wishing to make an impact. Those who are moved by the first motivation are bothered by the suffering, not by the fact that they themselves did not affect something. For them, if someone else were to eradicate the suffering, or if the suffering just disappeared by itself, that would be just as good.

f. Suppose, as a thought experiment, that for some reason all the galaxies in the cosmos, including everything in our galaxy except the solar system, were to vanish. That would leave only a very small fraction of the cosmos. If that happened, would the meaning of our lives be enhanced by the degree to which the cosmos had diminished in size (or indeed by any degree at all)? It similarly seems odd to suggest that if the cosmos were to remain as it is except for the Earth, or the solar system, which would for some reason become ten, or many zillion, times larger, meaning in life would then be improved by a factor of ten, or many zillion, or at all. But this suggests that Benatar's notion, that our lives are insufficiently meaningful since there is so much cosmos on which we make no impact, does not hold. If indeed, then, people's lives, or some people's lives, are insufficiently meaningful, it is probably not because there is so much cosmos on which they have no impact and leave no mark or in which they do not attain goals, etc.

## 6 Terminological Issues

I think that the metaphorical terms that many, including Benatar, employ in this discussion can distract readers from seeing that having an impact on masses of dead matter on distant stars has little, if anything, to do with meaning in life (or

the meaning of life).<sup>15</sup> Like others, Benatar often uses the phrases “from the cosmic perspective” and “from the perspective of the cosmos.”<sup>16</sup> He does point out that we should be careful not to understand these phrases to mean that the cosmos is a person that has a perspective.<sup>17</sup> But since the danger of this misunderstanding persists, it is unfortunate that he uses these metaphorical phrases at all instead of using clearer and more literal descriptions of what is happening when we consider the whole cosmos and whether we need to make an impact on the whole of it in order to have sufficiently meaningful lives. In fact, we do not see things from a cosmic perspective or from the perspective of the cosmos. What really happens is that we consider things from our own human perspective, both when we think of having an impact on our close environment and when we think of having an impact on the whole cosmos. It is we who consider what types of impact, if any, make life meaningful; whether making an impact on dead matter far away is significant; and whether refraining from making an impact on distant dead matter renders our lives insufficiently meaningful. The use of metaphorical phrases such as “from the perspective of the cosmos” (notwithstanding Benatar’s warning against personification) occludes this, since it may implicitly suggest that once we consider the cosmos at large, we are in fact taking on someone else’s perspective—that of the cosmos—and that the perspective of the cosmos may differ from ours.

The metaphorical term “perspective” is problematic as well because it often connotes specific types of standards. When people say that they are going to consider something “from a moral perspective,” “from an economic perspective,” “from a religious perspective,” etc., they often mean that in their consideration, they will apply certain standards (e.g., moral but not economic, or economic but not moral). As a result, the phrases “cosmic perspective” or “the perspective of the cosmos” may lead readers to presuppose that when they think about the cosmos, they must adopt, along with the “cosmic perspective,” some “cosmic” standards of meaningfulness. Put differently, the phrases “from the cosmic perspective” and “from the perspective of the cosmos” might give readers the impression that thinking about making an impact on the whole cosmos is inherently intertwined with accepting the standards that require us to have an impact on the whole cosmos in order to have sufficiently meaningful lives. This is another reason why it would have been preferable to use nonmetaphorical and more precise phrases, such as “when we think about our impact on the cosmos”: that is, phrases that discuss only the domain of the things affected, or their number, or their geographical position, and whether it is meaningful to affect them.

The use of the metaphorical term “perspective” is also problematic because some readers might unconsciously understand it too literally, in its visual sense. Although

<sup>15</sup> For some earlier uses of the metaphorical terms criticized ahead see, e.g., Thomas Nagel, “The Absurd,” *Journal of Philosophy* 68 (1971): 716–727; Iddo Landau, “The Meaning of Life *Sub Specie Aeternitatis*,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 89 (2011): 727–734; Joshua W. Seachris, “The *Sub Specie Aeternitatis* Perspective and Normative Evaluations of Life’s Meaningfulness: A Closer Look,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 16 (2013): 605–620.

<sup>16</sup> Benatar, op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 35.

considering what we need to affect in order to have a sufficiently meaningful life is an intellectual activity, readers might inadvertently get caught up in the visual image of an actual, physical eye looking at the whole cosmos and finding it difficult to discern a tiny dot (a metaphor of a person's life), which then becomes negligible to the eye and to the watcher. Common expressions in Benatar's text, such as "we might ask whether life has meaning *from* the most expansive of perspectives—what is sometimes called the 'perspective of the universe,'" or "earthly life is thus . . . meaningless *from* the cosmic perspective," may exacerbate this problematic visual imaging of the issue.<sup>18</sup> For this reason, too, I suggest that metaphorical phrases such as "from a cosmic perspective" and "from the perspective of the cosmos" are best avoided when discussing our impact, or lack thereof, on things in the whole cosmos, and the implications of this on the meaning of life.

Another problematic term employed in Benatar's (and others') discussion is the Latin *sub specie aeternitatis*, quoted earlier. This term, which can be translated as "under the perspective (or aspect, or point of view) of eternity," was commonly used by Spinoza.<sup>19</sup> But for Spinoza, conceiving things *sub specie aeternitatis* involves the acceptance of a special standard of value that has to do with specific types of love and of ethics, and with seeing things as necessary, universal, and eternal. Furthermore, in Spinoza's system, conceiving things *sub specie aeternitatis* is related to what might be seen as a special, high type of meaning in life, and refraining from seeing things *sub specie aeternitatis* leads people to miss that high type of meaning. Thus, this expression, too, carries connotations of an ambitious standard of meaningfulness already interwoven into our examination of the cosmos and our impact on it. Once the axioms of Spinoza's semireligious philosophical system have been accepted, his use of *sub specie aeternitatis* makes sense. But Benatar does not in fact accept these axioms in his philosophizing. Benatar's, as other scholars', use of this Spinozist term is therefore problematic, since it may occlude a clear and critical consideration of whether having an impact on faraway galaxies does indeed add meaning to life, and whether refraining from doing so renders life insufficiently meaningful.

Two other terms that Benatar employs, namely "terrestrial meaning" and "cosmic meaning," are problematic as well. Benatar relates having an impact on things on Earth to what he calls "terrestrial meaning," and having an impact on things in the cosmos at large to what he calls "cosmic meaning."<sup>20</sup> But this terminology already presupposes that it *is* meaningful to have an impact on what happens on distant stars in distant galaxies, so that if we do not do so, we lack that type of meaning. This, however, is the very point at issue. Because the cosmos is, of course, so much larger than Earth, cosmic meaning may automatically also seem to be much larger and more important than terrestrial meaning. The term "cosmic meaning," then,

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 21, 36; emphases added.

<sup>19</sup> See Baruch Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 481, 581, 607–608, 610, 612.

<sup>20</sup> Benatar, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 35.

interferes with our ability to consider whether having an impact on the whole cosmos is indeed so meaningful, and refraining from doing so in any way problematic.

## 7 Rational Requirement and Rational Permissibility

Benatar is somewhat unclear on whether he takes his arguments to make it rationally required or only rationally permissible to hold that people must make an impact on the whole cosmos in order to have sufficient meaning in life. In one place, he presents himself as being neutral on the issue:

We are nonetheless warranted in regretting our cosmic insignificance and the pointlessness of the entire human endeavor. [footnote:] This formulation is neutral between the regret being “rationally required” and its being “rationally permissible.” The latter claim is less extensive but sufficient to justify those who are concerned about the absence of cosmic meaning.<sup>21</sup>

In other places in the book, however, he seems to present his claim categorically, like all the other claims in the book that are presented as rationally required and not merely rationally permissible. Thus, when describing what his book will show, he writes, “life has no meaning from a cosmic perspective. . . . We are insignificant specks in a vast universe.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, when summarizing at the end of the book what he has shown in it, he writes, “I argued in chapter 3 that all human lives are meaningless from the cosmic perspective.”<sup>23</sup>

Be that as it may, I believe that the criticisms presented in the previous sections of this essay are strong enough to show that it is not rationally required to hold that lives that do not affect the whole cosmos are of insufficient meaning. I do not think that these criticisms show that it is downright rationally impermissible to hold Benatar’s position, as this position does not involve any self-contradictions. But I suggest that the criticisms above do show that Benatar’s position here is weak. I think that the criticisms of his claim and arguments are strong, and until they are answered, there are good reasons not to opt for the strict standard for sufficient meaningfulness that he puts forward.

Note also that Benatar’s concession, namely that it may be only rationally *permissible* to hold that lives that do not have an impact on the whole cosmos are of insufficient meaning, is not trivial. He writes that seeing his view as merely rationally permissible is “sufficient to justify those who are concerned about the absence of cosmic meaning.”<sup>24</sup> But the project of his book and of other writings of his is not merely to assist those concerned about an absence of cosmic meaning. The project that he outlines is more ambitious than that: it is to prove to all people, both those

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 63, 225 n 67.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 191.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 225 n 67.

concerned about the human condition and those not yet concerned about it, that it is appalling.<sup>25</sup> Hence, it should be described as a human predicament:

I shall argue that the (right) answers to life's big questions reveal that the human condition is a tragic predicament—one from which there is no escape. In a sentence: Life is bad, but so is death . . . both life and death are, in crucial respects, awful. Together, they constitute an existential vise—the wretched grip that enforces our predicament.<sup>26</sup>

This thesis that Benatar sets out to prove in the book is related to another one, which is that it would be better for humans, for their own sake, not to have been born at all, and that people should therefore not procreate.<sup>27</sup> But if Benatar's conclusion about the relationship between having an impact on the cosmos and insufficient meaning is only rationally *permissible*, then it is only *possible* to hold that there is a human predicament, and it is *equally* possible to hold that there is not. It is merely *possible* to hold that procreation is bad, and it is *equally* possible to hold that it is good. Put differently, if Benatar's view about having an impact on the cosmos is just rationally permissible, then the argument is not sufficiently strong to match the strength of the overall theses that Benatar aims to establish in this book and in others. Indeed, for this reason, Benatar's concession about the rational permissibility of the view is an exception in his book: all the other arguments in the book are presented as showing that it is rationally *required*, not merely rationally *permissible*, to accept that life is very bad in various ways. If Benatar's view about having an impact on the cosmos is only rationally permissible, then the general theses of the book, about the human predicament and the wrongfulness of procreation, are weakened. In other words, for the sake of Benatar's larger projects and claims, it is not in fact sufficient to see his view about the relationship between meaning and having an impact on the cosmos as merely rationally permissible.

## 8 Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined two groups of arguments for endorsing stricter standards for the goodness or meaningfulness of life than those usually used. The first group of arguments suggests that we should adopt the standards for the goodness of life that more fortunate beings than us would endorse. The second group suggests that we should adopt standards of meaningfulness that require us to have an impact on the whole cosmos. I have argued here that in their present form, both groups of arguments—notwithstanding their interest—are too problematic to accept.

However, these are only two out of several arguments for Benatar's general claims about the overall badness and meaninglessness of all human lives and the wrongness of bringing any person into existence. Some important critical work has

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1–2.

<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., *ibid.*, pp. 203–204.

already been done on some of Benatar's other arguments, and I am sure that more will follow.<sup>28</sup>

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