are by and large overshadowed by a traditional understanding of vulnerability as susceptibility to harm or injury. Even the assembly of authors who would link autonomy to vulnerability do so in a way that does not speak at length to vulnerability's constitutive ambiguity, that it opens us to care and love and nurture, violence and trespass and harm, all at once.

David Benatar and David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), ISBN 978-0-19-933354-7, vi + 269 pp.

Erik Magnusson, University of Oxford

In this latest volume in the Debating Ethics series from Oxford University Press, David Benatar and David Wasserman take opposing sides on the question that precedes all others in procreative ethics: is procreation *ever* morally justifiable? This question will undoubtedly strike many readers as strange or even unnecessary to pose, though for Benatar and Wasserman, this is precisely the problem. In societies where procreation is treated as a natural or private matter, and where reproductive rights are given near-absolute protection, people routinely overlook the fact that an act as significant as creating a new human life is something that stands in need of justification. *Debating Procreation* aims to remedy this complacency by putting forth cases for and against the justifiability of procreation, and leaving it up to readers to determine where the balance of reasons ultimately lies.

The book is divided into two equal parts, with Benatar defending the "anti-natalist" perspective in Part I, and Wasserman defending the "pro-natalist" perspective in Part II. I will summarize the arguments of each author before offering some brief critical comments on both.

In Part I, Benatar makes his positive case for anti-natalism through three distinct though mutually supporting arguments: the axiological asymmetry argument, the quality of life argument, and the misanthropic argument. For readers acquainted with Benatar's book-length defense of anti-natalism,[1] the first two arguments will cover familiar territory, though the third argument is new and serves as a genuine complement to the other two. Benatar begins in chapter 2 with the axiological asymmetry argument, which is easily the most innovative and challenging of the three. It is

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[1] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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based on the notion that there is an asymmetry between harms and benefits in terms of their presence and absence, such that coming into existence is always comparatively worse than being left out of it. As Benatar puts it,

> Whereas:
>
> 1. The presence of harm is bad; and
> 2. the presence of benefit is good,
>
> an asymmetrical evaluation applies to the *absence* of harm and benefit:
>
> 3. The absence of harm is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone; but
> 4. the absence of benefit is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. (23)

According to Benatar, we can assess the relative value of existence and nonexistence by comparing the value of (1) and (3) with the value of (2) and (4). When we make the first comparison, we find that nonexistence has a distinct advantage over existence, as nonexistence involves an absence of harm (which is good) whereas existence involves the presence of harm (which is bad). However, when we make the second comparison, we find that existence has no symmetrical advantage over nonexistence, for while the presence of benefit is good for the person who exists, the absence of benefit can only be bad if there is someone for that absence to be bad *for*. Thus, Benatar concludes that "coming into existence is always a net harm" (24), and that this constitutes a prima facie reason against having children.

Of course, irrespective of its implications for procreation, one might wonder whether the asymmetry is itself coherent. If the absence of benefit is not bad unless there is somebody for whom it is a deprivation, how can the absence of harm be good if there is nobody to enjoy it? Alternatively, if the absence of harm can be good if there is no one to enjoy it, why can't the absence of benefit be bad in the same way? Benatar admits that "[i]t is difficult to *prove* definitively that we must accept the axiological asymmetry" (24), but notes that it has significant explanatory power with respect to a number of other judgments that we tend to subscribe to upon reflection. For example, it seems to make sense of the judgment that we have a duty to avoid creating children who will have miserable lives but no duty to create children who will have happy lives; that it is odd to cite as a reason for procreation the fact that the child will benefit, but not odd to cite as a reason against procreation the fact that the child will suffer; that one can regret having brought a suffering child into existence for the existent child's sake, but cannot regret having failed to bring a happy child into existence for that merely possible child's sake; and that we are rightly sad for the presence of suffering in distant inhabited lands, but do not regret the absence of happiness in distant uninhabited lands (25-29). Benatar leaves open the possibility that these judgments may be rejected or accounted for without his asymmetry, though insists that the burden of justification ultimately lies with the skeptic, who must either defend their rejection of the judgments in question, or else provide an alternative explanation for why we ought to accept them.

Even if one accepts the asymmetry argument, one is not necessarily led to the anti-natalist conclusion. One might accept, for example, that a child is always disadvantaged by being brought into existence, but that having children is not thereby wrong because the disadvantages are not significant, and/or because they are normally offset by life's benefits. In chapter 3, Benatar seeks to block this option by showing that the quality of our lives is in fact very low, and that the harms of existence are therefore sufficiently serious to make bringing persons into existence wrongful. His argument here has two steps. First, drawing on a number of psychological phenomena, including adaptive preferences and tendencies toward optimism, he explains away the seemingly problematic notion that many people appear to enjoy their lives and to think they are going well. Then, having shown people to be unreliable judges of the quality of their own lives, Benatar provides what he believes is a more objective assessment of life's quality, focusing on the constant series of discomforts, disappointments, and hardships that accompany even the best lives. He concludes by insisting that even if *all* lives are not as bad as he claims they are, the mere possibility of such a life is enough to make procreation an unjustifiably risky enterprise.

Benatar's first two arguments in favor of anti-natalism are "philanthropic": they are focused on explaining how existence is comparatively worse and/or noncomparatively bad for the person who is brought into existence. However, there is also a "misanthropic" case for anti-natalism that focuses on "the terrible evil that humans wreak, and on various negative characteristic of our species" (78). In chapter 4, Benatar builds his misanthropic case for anti-natalism by defending the following moral argument:

1. We have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death.
2. Humans cause vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death.
3. Therefore, we have a presumptive duty to desist from bringing new humans into existence. (79)

Benatar spends the majority of the chapter substantiating premise (2), vividly cataloguing the "dark side" of human nature with an amount of grim detail that makes Arthur Schopenhauer seem optimistic by comparison. Then, in the remainder of the chapter, he turns his attention (though perhaps too briefly) toward substantiating premise (1), mainly by deflecting versions of the criticism that the presumptive duty to desist from bringing into existence members of destructive species can be overridden by the good that members of those species might do. Affixed to his philanthropic arguments, this misanthropic argument completes Benatar's case for anti-natalism: not only is it better for potential people never to be brought into existence, it is also better for the rest of us as well.

Not surprisingly, Wasserman is unconvinced by all of this, and in Part II of the book, he provides his reasons as to why. In contrast to Benatar's take on anti-natalism, Wasserman's take on pro-natalism is a qualified one: he is not trying to advance the strong thesis that procreation is *always* justifiable, but rather the weaker thesis that procreation *can* be justifiable—a thesis that, if successful, is sufficient to show that Benatar is wrong. Wasserman's argument proceeds in three steps. First, he offers a negative argument for pro-natalism by showing how different versions of the anti-natalist thesis fail. Second, he provides a positive argument for pro-natalism by showing how procreation can be justified. Finally, he attempts to delineate the limits of pro-natalism by exploring both impersonal and person-affecting constraints on procreation.

Following a brief but helpful survey of the existing literature in chapter 6, Wasserman begins his case for pro-natalism in chapter 7 by attacking three different arguments for anti-natalism: Benatar's asymmetry argument, Seana Shiffrin's consent argument,[2] and Matti Häyry's risk argument.[3] The primary target is Benatar here, though the inclusion of the latter arguments serves to support the idea that it is anti-natalism in general that is untenable as a philosophical position, not just Benatar's particular version of it. Interestingly, the bone that Wasserman picks with Benatar's argument is not the familiar one about the technical coherence of his asymmetry, but rather the jump that he makes from the premise that existence is harmful to the conclusion that procreation is wrongful. Even if the asymmetry is sound, and existence is always axiologically worse than nonexistence, why is it thereby wrongful to bring persons into existence? Benatar's quality of life argument is of course meant to bridge this gap by showing that the goods of even the best lives are dramatically outweighed by the bads, though Wasserman is unconvinced that it can do the work required of it, mainly because it depends on controversial and ultimately unsubstantiated assumptions about both the measurement of life's quality as well as how the average life stacks up against that measurement (155-66). And, according to Wasserman, once the weaknesses of the quality of life argument are exposed, Benatar's asymmetry argument loses its bite, for the most that it can establish is that a child who is brought into existence is thereby made worse off relative to nonexistence. This *might* form the basis of a moral complaint against the child's parents, though Wasserman insists that it is "a pretty feeble one" (152), as it would seem to rely on the implausible assumption that parents are obligated to maximize their children's interests in *all* circumstances, even when those children are otherwise living objectively decent and subjectively enjoyable lives. Following his rejection of the asymmetry argument, Wasserman concludes the chapter with brief but innovative responses to the consent and risk arguments, though for brevity's sake I will not rehearse those arguments here.

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[2] Seana Valentine Shiffrin, "Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm," *Legal Theory* 5 (1999): 117-48.

[3] M. Häyry, "A Rational Cure for Prereproductive Stress Syndrome," *Journal of Medical Ethics* 30 (2004): 377-78.

Having rejected arguments for anti-natalism in chapter 7, Wasserman turns in chapter 8 to provide his positive case for pro-natalism by showing that there are good reasons for having children that can play a justificatory role in procreative decision-making. According to Wasserman, while there is never a duty to bring future people into existence, creating new human lives may nevertheless be justified if one's reasons for doing so concern the good of the child who will be brought into existence:

> [I]n justifying [a procreative] decision to the child who results from it, parents can adduce the good of the life and relationship they sought with an unknown and unknowable child. Like the reasons that often motivate the attempt to establish other respectful and mutually beneficial relationships, these reasons concern the good of the unknown partner, but give rise to no duty to create the relationship in order to confer that good. (188)

For Wasserman, procreating on the basis of reasons that concern the good of the child is a *necessary* condition of morally justifiable procreation: one can *only* justify exposing a child to the harms and risks of human life if one's reasons for doing so concern the good of the child who will live that life. However, this raises some familiar questions about both the nature of the good in question, as well as the identity and ontological status of its intended beneficiary. How can one procreate for the sake of a being that does not exist at the time of, and whose identity in fact depends on, one's procreative decision? And how can existence constitute a good or a benefit for a being that would have been no worse off absent its conferral? Wasserman spends a good deal of chapter 8 addressing these questions as a means of substantiating his view. In response to the first question, he suggests that while prospective procreators cannot seek to benefit a particular child through their procreative decision, they may still seek to benefit *their* child, that is, the member of the broader class of potential children that happens to come into existence as a result of that decision. In response to the second question, he insists that existence itself is not the benefit that parents seek to bestow on their child in procreating, but is simply a necessary condition for bestowing benefits. In fact, Wasserman claims that the reasons that serve to justify the decision to procreate can also be invoked to justify the decision to adopt as well, emphasizing "the limited role that the actual vs. contingent existence of the child may play in the sorts of reasons prospective parents have" (191).

Of course, even if procreating on the basis of child-centered reasons is necessary for morally justifiable procreation, this does not imply that it is sufficient. On the contrary, procreation may be subject to additional moral requirements that constrain even suitably motivated procreative decisions. In chapters 9 and 10, Wasserman concludes his inquiry by considering both impersonal and person-affecting constraints on procreation. In chapter 9, he considers different versions of the impersonal thesis that procreators are morally obligated to create the child who will enjoy the most welfare, though ultimately rejects it on the familiar grounds that it reduces to absurdity when applied generally: if what matters in procreative decision-making is maximizing welfare in an impersonal sense, then this might suggest a positive duty to have children (an implication that Wasserman finds deeply counterintuitive), and may even justify the creation of an extraordinary number of children with barely worthwhile lives. In chapter 10, Wasserman considers a number of alternative person-affecting constraints on procreation, including those that are based on the rights of prospective children, and those that derive from the role-based duties of parents. He ultimately concludes that adopting the appropriate moral posture toward procreative decision-making precludes selectivity: good parents should be prepared to welcome whatever child results from their procreative activity, and should only take steps to ensure that such a child has a life that is worth living.

Both authors present compelling and controversial arguments about which there is an enormous amount to say, though I will limit myself to just a few critical comments on each. One of major pitfalls of Benatar's arguments for anti-natalism is their heavy reliance on a pessimistic view of human life. In order for each of his arguments to succeed, it must be the case that the goods of human life are dramatically outweighed by the bads, though this particular assessment of life's quality is highly controversial. Not only does it assume a strictly objectivist conception of well-being (which does not take people at their word regarding how well their lives are going), but it also assigns the average human life an exceedingly low score on that conception, one that few people are likely to feel the pull of. Philosophically, this seems like a misguided strategy. If one is going to make a case for a highly controversial conclusion (i.e., that procreation is always morally wrong), it seems more expedient to build one's case on uncontroversial premises that are already widely accepted. In this sense, alternative cases for anti-natalism, such as Shiffrin's consent argument or Häyry's risk argument, ultimately seem more promising.

Wasserman generally has intuition on his side given the conclusion he is arguing for, though there are certain places in which he might have benefited from additional argumentation as well. For example, despite the fact that his central argument for pro-natalism turns on the idea of procreative motivation, Wasserman spends very little time (less than a page) discussing the role that motives or intentions play in determining the permissibility of one's actions or decisions. He relies on intuitive judgments about analogous cases to substantiate the claim that motives *do* seem to matter, though the problem here is that intuitions pull in both directions. While there are certain cases in which the permissibility of an act seems to turn on one's motives for acting, there are other cases in which one's motives seem irrelevant, as reflected in the ongoing debate about the Doctrine of Double Effect. Given the significant controversy surrounding the moral significance of an agent's motives, Wasserman's argument would have been more persuasive had he been able to root it in a more general account of why motives matter.

Finally, it is worth making one last point about the book's format. While the book is presented as a debate, it is curiously one-sided: Wasserman has plenty to say about Benatar's arguments for anti-natalism, though Benatar has little, if anything, to say about Wasserman's arguments for pro-natalism. This seems like a missed opportunity. The spirit of exchange that the book's format is meant to foster could perhaps have been more fruitfully exploited had the editors requested short rebuttals from each author, or had Benatar incorporated a critique of Wasserman's views into his arguments for anti-natalism.

Overall, however, *Debating Procreation* is a valuable contribution to the burgeoning literature on the morality of procreation. Newcomers to that literature will find that it offers a helpful roadmap to existing positions and issues, while specialists will find no shortage of new and innovative arguments to move the debate forward. It is also a pleasure to read: the arguments are presented in a clear, jargon-free manner, and the text is abundant with illustrative examples and thought experiments that will keep readers engaged throughout. For anyone who has an interest in the morality of procreation—and especially for those who do not think that procreation raises any special moral issues—this book is highly recommended.