ORIGINAL ARTICLE

bioethics WILEY

How to reject Benatar's asymmetry argument

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Abstract

In this article I reconsider David Benatar's primary argument for anti-natalism—the *asymmetry argument*—and outline a three-step process for rejecting it. I begin in Part 2 by reconstructing the asymmetry argument into three main premises. I then turn in Parts 3–5 to explain how each of these premises is in fact false. Finally, I conclude in Part 6 by considering the relationship between the asymmetry argument and the quality of life argument in Benatar's overall case for anti-natalism and argue that it is the latter argument that is actually doing the work. In this sense, the asymmetry argument is not only unsuccessful in generating Benatar's anti-natalist conclusion, it is also unnecessary as well.

KEYWORDS

anti-natalism, asymmetry argument, David Benatar, procreative ethics, quality of life argument

1 | INTRODUCTION

In a series of articles and a widely discussed monograph, David Benatar has advanced the anti-natalist view that coming into existence is always a significant harm, and that humanity should accordingly be eased into extinction.[1],[2] His central case for this conclusion is based on two distinct though mutually supporting arguments: the *asymmetry argument*, which purports to show that existence is always comparatively worse than non-existence; and the *quality of life* argument, which purports to show that existence is always non-comparatively bad.[3] My goal in this article is to show how, and why,

the asymmetry argument ought to be rejected. To be sure, this is a task that has been undertaken before—since the publication of his *Better Never to Have Been* in 2006, a small but sophisticated body of literature has emerged that focuses on evaluating Benatar's arguments from a variety of philosophical perspectives. However, there are at least three good reasons for giving the asymmetry argument renewed attention. First, while it has been subject to a number of prominent critiques, many appear to be based on misinterpretations of its claims, including the assumption that it is concerned primarily with impersonal as opposed to person-affecting value. Thus, there is an interest in setting the critical record straight, distinguishing potentially successful strategies for addressing the asymmetry argument from those that simply miss their target. Second, in evaluating Benatar's arguments, critics of all orientations have been insufficiently attentive to the level of interdependence between them, and the extent to which the asymmetry argument relies on the quality of life argument to generate its anti-natalist conclusion. Not only has this prevented critics from mounting the strongest possible case against Benatar's anti-natalism, but it has also prevented them from bringing into clear focus the considerations that lie at its core, namely, a pessimistic view of the quality of human existence. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, critics of Benatar's asymmetry argument have not had their last word. Over the past several years Benatar has issued a number of restatements of his argument that

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[1] For insightful and extremely thorough comments on a previous draft, I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers of *Bioethics*.

[2] Benatar, D. (1997). Why it is better never to come into existence. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *34*(3), 345–355; Benatar, D. (2000). The wrong of wrongful life, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *37*(2),175–183; (2006). Benatar, D. *Better never to have been: The harm of coming into existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; and Benatar, D. (2015). Part I: Anti-natalism. In Benatar, D. and Wasserman, D. (Eds.), *Debating procreation: Is it wrong to reproduce?* (pp. 11–132). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[3] Benatar has recently proposed a third misanthropic argument for anti-natalism that focuses on "the terrible evil that humans wreak, and on various negative characteristics of our species," including negative aesthetic characteristics. For two recent iterations of this argument, see Benatar and Wasserman (2015a). Chapter 4; Benatar, D. (2015b). The misanthropic argument for anti-natalism. In Hannan, S., Brennan, S., and Vernon, R. (Eds.) *Permissible progeny? The morality of procreation and parenting* (pp. 34–64). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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consider and respond to the most prominent objections that have been raised against it.[4] Given the grim implications of this argument being correct, we ought to consider whether a suitably modified version can stand up to scrutiny.

In this article I revisit the asymmetry argument in light of these considerations and outline a three-step process for rejecting it. I begin in Part 2 by reconstructing the asymmetry argument into three main premises. I then turn in Parts 3–5 to show how each of these premises is in fact false. Finally, I conclude in Part 6 by considering the relationship between the asymmetry argument and the quality of life argument in Benatar's overall case for anti-natalism and argue that it is the latter argument that is actually doing the work. In this sense, the asymmetry argument is not only unsuccessful in generating Benatar's anti-natalist conclusion, it is also unnecessary as well.

2 | THE ASYMMETRY ARGUMENT

The asymmetry argument is based on the idea that there is a fundamental asymmetry between harms and benefits in terms of their presence and absence, which allegedly entails that it is always preferable never to exist. 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 someone for whom this absence is a deprivation.[5]

A visual representation of this asymmetry is shown in Figure 1.[6]

According to Benatar, we can assess the relative value of existence and non-existence by comparing the value of quadrants 1 and 3 in Figure 1 with the value of quadrants 2 and 4. When we make the first comparison, we find that non-existence has a distinct advantage over existence, as non-existence 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 non-existence, for while the presence of benefit

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of harm (Bad)	(3) Absence of harm (Good)
(2) Presence of benefit (Good)	(4) Absence of benefit (Not Bad)

FIGURE 1 Benatar's asymmetry

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,"[7] and that this constitutes a strong moral reason against having children.

As presented above, Benatar's asymmetry argument relies on the truth of three main premises:

(P1) There is a fundamental asymmetry between harms and benefits in terms of their presence and absence.

(P2) This asymmetry entails that coming into existence is always a net harm.

(P3) That coming into existence is always a net harm entails that it is always wrong to procreate.[8]

I demonstrate in what follows that while each of these premises is in certain respects intuitively appealing, all are in fact false: there is no asymmetry between harms and benefits in terms of their presence and absence; even if there *were* such an asymmetry, it would not entail that coming into existence is always a net harm; and even if such an asymmetry *did* imply that coming into existence is always a net harm this would not by itself entail that it is always wrong to procreate. This will show that if Benatar has

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[4]Benatar, D. (2012). Every conceivable harm: A further defense of anti-natalism. *South African Journal of Philosophy, 30*(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; and Benatar and Wasserman (2015a), op. cit., note 3.

[5]Benatar (2015a), op. cit., note 3, p. 23.

[6]Ibid., p. 23.

[7]Ibid., p. 24.

[8]It is important to note that, as stated here, P3 is what Benatar needs to claim in order for his asymmetry argument to generate anti-natalism independently, that is, without appeal to claims about the non-comparative quality of human existence. Given his recently revised view that the degree of harm matters for moving from the claim that existence is harmful to the conclusion that procreation is wrongful (Benatar, 2015, p. 40, op. cit., note 3), he might now prefer a more qualified version of P3, e.g., one that states "that coming into existence is a net harm entails that it is *pro tanto* wrong to procreate." I return to the relationship between the asymmetry and quality of life arguments in Part 6 below.

a plausible route to anti-natalism it must be via his distinct quality of life argument.

3 | REJECTING P1

Let us begin by evaluating P1. Irrespective of its implications for the morality of procreation, it is natural to wonder whether Benatar's asymmetry is itself coherent. If the absence of benefit is not bad unless there is someone 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 nobody to enjoy it, why can't the absence of benefit be bad in the same way? Benatar admits that "it is difficult to *prove* definitively that we must accept the axiological asymmetry,"[9] but notes that it has considerable explanatory power with respect a number of other judgments to which we tend to subscribe upon reflection. Perhaps most importantly, it seems to make sense of the common sense moral judgment that there is a strong duty to avoid bringing into existence people who will lead miserable lives, but no corresponding duty to bring into existence people who will lead happy lives.[10] As Benatar explains:

> [T]he reason why we think that there is a duty not to bring suffering people into existence is that the presence of this suffering would be bad (for the sufferers) and the absence of the suffering is good (even though there is nobody to enjoy the absence of suffering). In contrast to this, we think that there is no duty to bring happy people into existence because while their pleasure would be good for them, its absence would not be bad for them (given that there would be nobody who would be deprived of it).[11]

Benatar goes on to make parallel arguments with respect to three related judgments, including the judgment 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 we can regret having brought a suffering child into existence for that 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. To the extent that we accept these "quite plausible views," Benatar contends that we should also accept his explanation for them.[12]

Benatar's argument for the asymmetry is a best explanation argument: it derives support for the asymmetry from its ability to explain a set of intuitive judgments that are otherwise difficult to explain. Notice, however, that this provides a reason for accepting the asymmetry only if the following are also true: (a) we are committed to the judgments in question; (b) there is no alternative principle that better explains them; and (c) there are independent reasons for thinking that the proposed explanation— the asymmetry—is valid. I will assume for the sake of argument that (a) is true, and I will suspend consideration of (b) for the time being. The question, then, is whether we have reason for thinking the asymmetry is valid independently of the intuitive judgments it supports. If we do not, then we should either reject the judgments that follow from it or try to provide an alternative explanation for why we ought to accept them.

I will challenge the coherence of Benatar's asymmetry in a moment, though, before doing so, it is first necessary to make one clarificatory point about its content. While the terms good and bad in Benatar's asymmetry admit of both impersonal and person-affecting interpretations, it is clear that Benatar intends them to be interpreted in the latter sense: his claim is not merely that the absence of harm in the absence of a person to experience it is good for the world generally, but rather that it is good *for the possible person* who would have experienced it had they existed.[13] Thus, a statement of Benatar's asymmetry that is truer to the aims of his argument might be put as follows:

Whereas:

1. The presence of harm is bad for the person who experiences it; and
2. the presence of benefit is good for the person who experiences it,

an asymmetrical evaluation applies to the *absence* of harm and benefit:

3. The absence of harm is good for the person who does not experience it, even if this absence is achieved by that person never existing; but
4. the absence of benefit is only bad for the person who does not experience it if that person exists and is thereby deprived by the absence.

This more explicit statement of Benatar's asymmetry allows us to see where its problems lie. Claims 1 and 2 are uncontroversial: the presence of harm is indeed bad for the person who experiences it, and the presence of benefit is indeed good for the person who experiences it. Claim 4, while potentially controversial, is at least intelligible on a person-affecting understanding of harms and benefits: if there is no person for whom the absence of benefit is a deprivation, then such an absence cannot be bad *for* that person (even if it can

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[9]Ibid., p. 24.

[10]This judgment, coined "the asymmetry" by Jeff McMahan, represents a widely held intuition in procreative ethics, but one that many regard as hard to defend. It would therefore count as a significant advantage for Benatar's argument if it could explain why we should endorse it. For McMahan's original description, see McMahan, J. (1981). Problems of population theory. *Ethics, 92*(1), 96–127, esp. pp. 99–104.

[11]Benatar (2006), op. cit., note 2, p. 32.

[12]Ibid., 34–46. See also Benatar (2015a), op. cit., note 3, pp. 25–27.

[13]See, for example, Benatar, (2015a), op. cit., note 3, p. 22: "[W]e are seeking to determine whether it is coming into existence or never coming into existence that is best *for* X."
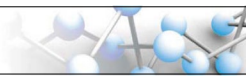
still be bad in an impersonal sense). Claim 3, however, is harder to make sense of as a person-affecting claim. How can the absence of harm be good for a person who never exists, and in a way that does not imply the symmetrical claim that the absence of benefit is also bad for them?

Many critics have argued that it cannot be, and that claim 3 can make sense *only* as a claim about impersonal value.[14] Jeff McMahan, for example, argues that "there seems to be no way to understand this claim except as a claim about impersonal value. If it is good that suffering or miserable people do not exist, even though it is not good or better for anyone, how else can we understand the status of this good except as a good that is not *good for*—that is, except as an impersonal good?"[15] If McMahan and others are correct that claim 3 makes sense only as a claim about impersonal value, then Benatar's asymmetry is both explained and presumably debunked by his deployment of two separate accounts of value in claims 3 and 4. In other words, the reason why the absence of harm in non-existence is good, while the absence of benefit is merely not bad, does not trace to a fundamental asymmetry between harm and benefit, but rather to an equivocation between impersonal and person-affecting views. Benatar could of course address this equivocation by recasting claim 3 as a claim about impersonal value, though doing so would not be friendly to his argument. Not only would an impersonal reading of claim 3 preclude him from claiming what he wants to—that never existing is better *for* the possible person who may have otherwise existed—but it would also collapse the asymmetry between claims 3 and 4, for if the absence of harm in the absence of a person to experience that harm can be good in an impersonal sense (e.g., by contributing to a world with greater overall utility than would otherwise be the case), then surely the absence of benefit in the absence of a person to experience that benefit can also be bad in the same way (e.g., by contributing to a world with less overall utility than would otherwise be the case).

However, Benatar denies that he is relying on an impersonal view of goodness, and insists that claim 3 is being misinterpreted by those who attribute one to him.[16] According to Benatar, claim 3 does not entail the "absurd literal claim" that there is a non-existent person for whom the absence of harm is good, but rather that in a counterfactual scenario in which such a person *did* exist, non-existence would have been judged to be preferable. As he explains:

> Claim 3 says that this absence [of pain] is good when judged in terms of the interests of the person who would otherwise have existed. We may not know who that person would have been, but we can still say that whoever that person would have been, the avoidance

of his or her pains is good when judged in terms of his or her potential interests. If there is any (obviously loose) sense in which the absent pain is good *for* the person who could have existed but does not exist, this is it.[17]

In support of this counterfactual reading, Benatar follows Joel Feinberg in likening the claim "better never to have been" to the claim "better off dead."[18] When we claim that a person is better off dead we do not usually mean that there is a state after death in which that person would be better off, but rather that ceasing to exist would be preferable to existing given the low quality of their current existence. By parity of reasoning, when we claim that it is better never to have been we need not be claiming that there is a state prior to existence in which possible people are better off, but rather that never existing would be judged preferable to existing given the non-negligible harm associated with existence. Contrary to the claims of critics, this interpretation does not rely on an impersonal view of goodness, and still leaves room for the possibility that a person may be harmed by being brought into existence.

This counterfactual interpretation might allow Benatar to avoid the charge of relying on an impersonal view of goodness, though it also exposes him to a different type of problem, for if there is nothing incoherent about claiming that the absence of harm is good when judged in terms of the interests of a person who would have experienced it had they existed, then there should be nothing incoherent about claiming that the absence of benefit is bad when judged from the same perspective. The coherence of the former claim is based on the idea that *had* such a person existed, they would have had an interest in harm avoidance, and this interest would have given them reason to prefer a scenario in which their exposure to harm was minimized. Thus, when judged in terms of their potential interests, we can say that the absence of harm is good *for* that possible person. However, because they would have also had an interest in benefit provision, there is no reason why the counterfactual reasoning deployed to makes sense of claim 3 as a person-affecting claim would not also modify claim 4, such that the absence of benefit is bad when judged in terms of their potential interests. And when the absence of benefit in non-existence is comparatively worse than the presence of harm a possible person would have experienced had they existed, then this type of reasoning leads us to the judgment that it would have been all things considered *better* for them to exist. By way of illustration, consider Benatar's own example of a person who lives "a life of utter bliss adulterated only by the pain of a single pin prick."[19] Such a person has an interest in harm avoidance, and therefore has reason to prefer a scenario in which their exposure to harm is minimized, namely, a scenario in which they never exist and are never

[14]Harman, E. (2009). Critical study. *Noûs*, *43*(4), 776–785, esp. 779–780; McMahan, J. (2009). Asymmetries in the morality of causing people to exist. In M. A. Roberts, and D. T. Wasserman (Eds.), *Harming future persons: Ethics, genetics, and the nonidentity problem* (pp. 49–68), pp. 61–64. Dordrecht: Springer. DeGrazia, D. (2012). *Creation ethics: Reproduction, genetics, and quality of life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, esp. pp. 145–150; and Overall, C. (2012). *Why have children? The ethical debate*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, esp. pp. 97–106.

[15]McMahan, op. cit., note 14, p. 62.

[16]Benatar (2013), op. cit., note 4, pp. 125–126.

[17]Benatar (2006), op. cit., note 2, p. 31.

[18]Ibid., pp, 21–22. For Feinberg's original comparison, see Feinberg, J. (1992). Wrongful life and the counterfactual element in harming In Feinberg, J. *Freedom and fulfillment: Philosophical essays* (pp. 16–17). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[19]Benatar (2006), op. cit., note 2, p. 48.
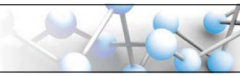
pricked by a pin. However, such a person also has an interest in benefit provision, and therefore has reason to prefer a scenario in which their exposure to benefit is maximized; namely, a scenario in which they exist and enjoy a life of utter bliss. And because the absence of this benefit would have been worse than the minor harm they will experience by existing, the counterfactual reasoning that Benatar deploys in support of claim 3 actually supports the view that it is all things considered better for this person to exist.[20]

Benatar's standard response to this type of case is to claim that while such a person is lucky to live a charmed life, her existence offers her no real advantage over non-existence, which still presents the advantage of avoiding the single pinprick.[21] Notice, however, that in the present context, this response simply begs the question, for it assumes the truth of the claim under consideration, namely, that the absence of harm in non-existence is good for the possible person who otherwise would have experienced it, whereas the absence of benefit in non-existence is not bad for the possible person who otherwise would have experienced it. But the coherence of this claim is precisely what is at issue. Because existing people have interests in harm avoidance and benefit provision, the counterfactual reasoning that is used to support the claim that the absence of harm is good when judged in terms of the interests of the person who otherwise would have experienced it must also entail that the absence of benefit is bad when judged from the same perspective—at the very least, Benatar has supplied no non-question-begging reason for why the potential interest in benefit provision should not be taken into account when making the counterfactual judgment. Of course, one might reasonably object—as Benatar has[22]—that this entailment is independently absurd, for if the absence of benefit in non-existence is bad for the person who otherwise would have experienced it, then this would imply that we should regret, *for the sake of that merely possible person*, that they did not exist and enjoy the benefit (a judgment that many philosophers take to be mistaken). Notice, however, that this objection is not available to Benatar, for not only does the counterfactual reasoning deployed in support of claim 3 commit him to this view, but dismissing it in the context of claim 4 would require doing the same in the context of claim 3: if we cannot regret for the sake of a merely possible person that they missed out on the benefits they otherwise would have experienced had they existed, then there is no reason to think we can be relieved for the sake of a merely possible person that they avoided the harms they otherwise would have experienced had they existed. This suggests the following dilemma for Benatar's counterfactual interpretation of claim 3: either claim 3 makes sense as a counterfactual claim, in which case claim 4 must be similarly modified; or the modified version of claim 4 is unintelligible, in which case the counterfactual interpretation of claim 3 must be as well.

In summary, then, while interpreting claim 3 as a counterfactual claim might allow Benatar to avoid the charge of relying on an impersonal view of goodness, it also leads to a symmetrical view of harms and benefits, thereby undermining P1 of the asymmetry argument. This symmetrical view still allows for the possibility that a person may be harmed by being brought into existence, though whether this is the case would seem to depend on the projected balance of harms over benefits over the course of that person's lifetime, or the difference between quadrants 1 and 2 in Figure 1.

Benatar is likely to respond that there are costs to viewing harms and benefits symmetrically in this way, as it may conflict with our intuitive judgments or commit us to views that we would otherwise reject.[23] For instance, if we posit a symmetrical account of harms and benefits along the lines just described, we might be committing to the view that just as we have a strong duty to avoid bringing into existence children who will lead miserable lives, we also have an equally strong duty to bring into existence children who will lead happy lives. However, there are at least two major problems with this line of response. First, it is far from clear that an appeal to intuition works in Benatar's favor. If the choice that we face is between (a) rejecting the four beliefs supported by Benatar's asymmetry, and (b) rejecting Benatar's asymmetry and its anti-natalist implications, it seems as though (b) may be the easier choice to make. While (b) commits us to the admittedly odd[24] view that we have a *pro tanto* duty to procreate (which, like all *pro tanto* duties, can be overridden by competing moral considerations), (a) commits us to the deeply counterintuitive view that it is *always* wrong to procreate and that humanity should accordingly be eased into extinction.[25] In this sense, as Rivka Weinberg puts it, "the implications of Benatar's view may be more counterintuitive than the four beliefs are intuitive."[26]

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[20]This conclusion should not be surprising. On Feinberg's original account, it is only in exceedingly rare cases (e.g., those involving severe congenital impairments), that the relevant counterfactual comparison supports the judgment that it would have been better for a person never to exist. See Feinberg op. cit., note 18, pp. 19–26.

[21]See, for example, Benatar (2006), op. cit., note 2, p. 48.

[22]Ibid., 38–39.

[23]See, for example, ibid., 202–208, and Benatar (2015a), op. cit., note 3, pp. 28–30.

[24]While it sits uneasily with a Western commitment to procreative autonomy, is worth noting that a pro tanto duty to procreate is not universally perceived as odd. For example, Mulela Margaret Munalula has noted that in many African cultures there is a perceived duty to procreate, which sometimes acts as an impediment to managing high fertility rates and their deleterious social effects. See Munalula, M. M. (2012). Rethinking the right to procreate: An African imperative. *Theoretical Inquiries in Law, 13*(1), 303–322, esp. pp. 306–311. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this clarification.

[25]Benatar himself is not concerned with the prospect of human extinction, as it is not clear to him that the features that are distinctive to humanity—including moral agency and rational deliberation—have value *sub specie aeternitatis*, or from the perspective of the universe (see Benatar, 2006, note 2, app. 199–200). However, there at least two problems with this type of response. First, it depends on the view that we ought to judge the value of our lives *sub specie aeternitatis*, though the intelligibility of this view has been subject to forceful critique (see, for example, David Wasserman's recent discussion in Part II: Pro-natalism in Benatar and Wasserman, op. cit., note 3, esp. pp. 160–166, as well as Thaddeus Metz's (2011). Are lives worth creating? *Philosophical Papers, 40*(2), 233–255, esp. pp. 249–254). Second, adopting this view may diminish the force of Benatar's own account, for if (a) it is intelligible and appropriate to judge the value of human life *sub specie aeternitatis*, and (b) human life is found to be insignificant from that perspective, then it is unclear why preventing the harms of human existence would be as morally urgent as Benatar suggests. This poses yet another dilemma for Benatar's argument: either we are to judge the value of human life from the perspective of the universe, in which case the harms of coming into human existence are morally insignificant; or the harms of coming into human existence are morally significant, in which case we are assuming the appropriateness of human-centered normative and evaluative standards (see also Metz, op. cit., note 3, p. 253).

[26]Weinberg, R. (2012). Is having children always wrong? *South African Journal of Philosophy, 30*(1), 26–37, 28.

Second, and more to the point, any intuitive cost associated with a symmetrical account of harms and benefits is a problem for which Benatar himself is answerable, given that this is an implication of the reasoning that underlies *his* view. One of Benatar's standard moves in responding to critics is to claim that their proposed strategies for resisting his asymmetry argument leave them unable to explain the four judgments he appeals to in its support.[27] But if the preceding arguments are sound, then Benatar cannot explain them either. If claim 3 is interpreted as a counterfactual claim, then barring some independent argument for why the potential interest in benefit provision should not be included in the relevant counterfactual comparison, claim 4 must be similarly modified, in which case Benatar cannot explain why we have a strong duty to avoid bringing into existence children who will live miserable lives, but no corresponding duty to bring into existence children who will live happy lives. Benatar might be able to provide such an argument, though unless and until he does, the asymmetry lacks an independent justification and should therefore be rejected.[28]

4 | REJECTING P2

Rejecting P1 is sufficient to show that the asymmetry argument fails, for if P1 is false, then P2 and P3 do not follow. However, in the interest of providing a comprehensive response to the asymmetry argument, it is also worth showing how P2 and P3 fail as well—this way, any remaining controversy about my rejection of P1 will be answered by my rejection of the later premises in the argument.

Suppose for the sake of argument that I have been mistaken so far, and that there *is* a fundamental asymmetry between harms and benefits in terms of their presence and absence. Does this asymmetry generate the conclusion that Benatar draws from it, that coming into existence is always a *net* harm?[29] Not necessarily. Even if we grant P1 and assume that there is always an advantage associated with never existing (i.e., avoiding the harms of existence), coming into

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of harm -1	(3) Absence of harm +1
(2) Presence of benefit +5	(4) Absence of benefit 0

FIGURE 2 A net beneficial existence

existence would constitute a net harm only if existence proved to be more disadvantageous than non-existence is advantageous—that is, if the value of quadrant 3 in Benatar's asymmetry is greater than the combined value of quadrants 1 and 2. This is a possibility in certain instances, such as paradigm wrongful life cases, though it is not necessarily the case in what I will assume for now are possible human lives, in which the harms of existence are outweighed by the benefits.[30] To illustrate the plausibility of this view, it is helpful to assign numerical values to the quadrants of Benatar's asymmetry in a way that reflects an actual distribution of benefits and harms within a possible human life. Consider, then, another modification (Figure 2).

If we restrict our comparison to quadrants 1 and 3 we will find that non-existence is preferable to existence, as non-existence involves avoiding one unit of harm, whereas existence involves suffering it.[31] However, in order to make a true comparison between the two scenarios, we also have to take into account the benefits that are associated with existence. Even if we assume that the absence of these benefits is not bad in the case of non-existence, and thereby assign a neutral value to quadrant 4, we will still find that existence is preferable to non-existence so long as the value of quadrant 2 is more than twice the value of quadrant 1. In this case, existence is clearly preferable to non-existence, given its high projected benefit: whereas existence has a net value of +4, non-existence only has a net value of +1. In this sense, while non-existence always presents the advantage of avoiding the harms of existence, whether this constitutes an advantage *over* existence will depend how the harms of existence stack up against its benefits.

Benatar anticipates this type of objection to his argument and offers up two lines of response.[32] The first is to question its under-

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[27]See, for example, Benatar's (2012) responses to Weinberg and Boonin and to Harman, Kaposy, DeGrazia, and Bayne in Benatar (2013), op. cit., note 4.

[28]In the latest restatement of his view, Benatar claims that "[t]hose who wish to deny axiological asymmetry must be held to a full accounting of their alternative and to accepting the implications of it, because it is far too easy to *say* that one rejects axiological asymmetry when one is not held to such account" (see Benatar and Wasserman, 2015a, pp. 28–29). I agree that having to reject the four intuitive judgments may be a large bullet to bite, and in this sense, it is worth giving further consideration to promising alternative explanations that have been proposed in the literature, including the notion that the scope of moral obligation is restricted to actual past, existing, and future persons (see Weinberg, 2012, op. cit., note 26, esp. pp. 28–32), or that our duties not to harm are morally weightier than our duties to benefit (see DeGrazia, D. (2010). Is it wrong to impose the harms of human life? A reply to Benatar. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics*, 31(4), 317–332, esp. p. 322). However, I disagree with the suggestion implicit in the above passage that the asymmetry argument cannot be soundly rejected in the absence of such an alternative. Just as one can soundly reject a proposed proof for a mathematical problem without solving the problem itself, one can soundly reject Benatar's explanation of his four intuitive judgments without providing an alternative explanation.

[29]This inference in Benatar's asymmetry argument has been left surprisingly underexamined in the existing literature. For three notable exceptions, see Brill, S. (2012). Sick and healthy: Benatar on the logic of value. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, 31(1), 38–54; Metz, op. cit., note 3, esp. pp. 246–249, and Smuts, A. (2014). To be or never to have been? Anti-natalism and a life worth living. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 17(4), 711–729, esp. pp. 716–717.

[30]In his quality of life argument, Benatar rejects this type of assumption as overly optimistic, arguing that even the best human lives are net harms. I briefly address this argument in Part 6 below.

[31]Note that the value of quadrants 1 and 3 must necessarily mirror each other, for if the advantage of non-existence consists in avoiding the harms of existence, then quadrants 1 and 3 must be equal negative and positive values.

[32]Benatar (2006), op. cit., note 2, pp. 45–49.

Person S (Sick)	Person H (Healthy)
(1) Presence of sickness (Bad) -	(3) Absence of sickness (Good) +
(2) Presence of capacity for quick recovery (Good) +	(4) Absence of capacity for quick recovery (Not Bad) 0

FIGURE 3   Sick and healthy

lying assumption that the benefits of existence can always compensate for the harms. In his distinct quality of life argument, Benatar argues that there is a certain threshold of harm above which benefits stop playing a compensating role, suggesting that we cannot always determine the quality of a person's life simply by looking at the ratio of harms to benefits.[33] If this is true, then the fact that quadrant 2 is more than twice the value of quadrant 1 would not necessarily entail that existence is preferable to non-existence, for there is a certain value of quadrant 1 that "no quantity of good can outweigh."[34] Notice, however, that this response cannot by itself answer the objection, for even if true, it does not show that existence cannot be preferable to non-existence in cases where the benefits outweigh the harms, but only that it cannot be preferable in cases where the level of harm expressed in quadrant 1 exceeds the relevant threshold—it still leaves open the possibility that existence can be preferable to non-existence in cases where the value of quadrant 1 falls below the threshold, e.g., in the case of Benatar's pinprick victim. Of course, Benatar might respond that there are in fact no such cases, for on the terms of his quality of life argument, even the best human lives contain a substantial amount of harm. This is an intelligible response to the preceding objection, though it comes at a cost: by deferring to substantive claims about the quality of human existence, Benatar would be conceding that the asymmetry argument cannot in fact stand alone, but must rely on the truth of the quality of life argument to yield the judgment that it is always better never to exist.

However, Benatar has a second response to the above objection that does not rely on his quality of life argument and that in his view offers "the best way to show that [Figure 2] is mistaken."[35] According to Benatar, claiming that existence is preferable to non-existence in Figure 2 is like claiming that a person S (sick), who is prone to regular bouts of illness but who has the capacity to recover quickly, is in a

preferable position to person H (healthy), who lacks the capacity to recover quickly but who never gets sick (Figure 3).[36]

In this analogy, never existing is compared to never getting sick, while a net beneficial existence is compared to getting sick regularly with a capacity for quick recovery. Benatar suggests that the type of reasoning that is used to support the conclusion that it is better to exist in the previous example implies that it is better to be S than it is to be H. "But," he argues:

> this cannot be right, for surely it is *always* better to be H (a person who never gets sick and is thus not disadvantaged by lacking the capacity for quick recovery). The whole point is that (2) is *good for S* but does not constitute an advantage over H. By assigning a positive charge to (2) and a '0' to (4), [Figure 3] suggests that (2) is an advantage over (4), but it quite clearly is not. The assignment of values in [Figure 3], and hence also in [Figure 2], must be mistaken.[37]

Benatar is correct that it is always better to be H than it is to be S in the case he describes, though as a response to the above objection, his analogy fails for at least two reasons. First, the case of S and H involves a different type of comparison than the case of existence and non-existence. This is not only because it involves a comparison of two existent persons (or two possible states of existence), but also because it involves a comparison of instrumental rather than intrinsic goods.[38] Unlike the benefits of existence, which are intrinsically valuable for the person who exists, the capacity for quick recovery is instrumentally valuable only to the extent that it allows a person to regain their health. The goods in quadrant 2 of Figure 3 are therefore not analogous to the goods in quadrant 2 of Figure 2, for as Aaron Smuts puts it, "there are no goods in quadrant (2) worth having that compensate for the bads of quadrant (1)."[39]

However, a second and more significant reason why Benatar's analogy fails is that, unlike the benefits of existence, which can in principle *outweigh* the harms of existence, the capacity to quickly recover from an illness can at best serve a canceling function for the harm associated with getting sick. In other words, the value of quadrant 2 of Benatar's analogy can serve only to negate the disvalue of quadrant 1, meaning that the column under Person S in Figure 3 can at best have a neutral value (as compared to the positive value of the column under Person H). This is not analogous to the scenario described in Figure 2. In that scenario, the benefits of existence significantly outweigh the harms of existence, allowing Scenario A to have a positive value that exceeds the positive value of Scenario B. In this sense, even if it is better to be H than it is to be S, this does not shed

[33]Ibid., pp. 46 and 63–64.

[34]Ibid., p. 63.

[35]Ibid., p. 47.

[36]Benatar (2006), op. cit., note 2, p. 47.
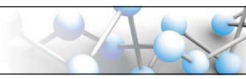
[37]Ibid., p. 47.

[38]Brill, op. cit., note 29, pp, 43–45; Metz, op. cit., note 3, p. 248; and Smuts, op. cit., note 29, pp. 716–717.

[39]Smuts, op. cit., note 29, p. 717.

any light on the comparison between existence and non-existence, as the two cases are not analogous in the relevant way.

This second response to Benatar's analogy reveals a fundamental mistake he makes when comparing existence with non-existence in his original asymmetry. By using the terms bad and good to refer to the presence of harm and the presence of benefit in existence, Benatar gives the impression that quadrants 1 and 2 necessarily cancel each other out. This, in turn, makes it seem as though non-existence always has an advantage over existence, for on the terms of Benatar's asymmetry, the absence of harm is good in non-existence while the absence of benefit is merely not bad. However, in order to make a true comparison between existence and non-existence, we need to know more precisely how the harms of existence stack up against its benefits.[40] If the disvalue of quadrant 1 exceeds the value of quadrant 2, then scenario A will have a negative value, and will therefore be inferior to scenario B, which always has a positive value that is equivalent to the negative value of quadrant 1. If, however, the value of quadrant 2 exceeds the disvalue of quadrant 1 by more than two times, then scenario A will have a higher positive value than scenario B, and will therefore be the preferable scenario from the perspective of X. Since it is reasonable to think that the value of quadrant 2 can exceed the value of quadrant 1 by more than two times—which is simply to say that the benefits of existence can outweigh the harms—Benatar's asymmetry does not generate the conclusion that coming into existence is always a net harm, even if the controversial terms of that asymmetry are granted.

At this point, Benatar might respond with one of two objections that he has previously raised in response critics of P2.[41] The first is to claim that the importance of the sick and healthy analogy is being overstated in the present discussion, for in his initial presentation, he explicitly denies that it is necessary to prove the truth of the asymmetry argument:

> Notice, in any event, the [sick and healthy] analogy need not be read as proving that quadrant (2) is good and quadrant (4) is not bad [...] Instead, the analogy could be interpreted as showing how, given the asymmetry, (2) is not an advantage over (4), whereas (1) is a disadvantage relative to (3). It would thereby show that Scenario B is preferable to Scenario A.[42]

In other words, because the sick and healthy analogy is merely illustrative of what Benatar has already argued for—that quadrant 2 is not an advantage over quadrant 4— then "even a successful critique of the analogy would fail to undermine the asymmetry argument."[43] However, the problem with this type of response is twofold. First, it underplays the role that Benatar assigns to this analogy in responding to the relevant objection, namely, that on the terms of the asymmetry, scenario A can be preferable to scenario B as long as the value of quadrant 2 is more than twice the value of quadrant 1. Benatar explicitly claims that his sick and healthy analogy offers "the best way"[44] of responding to this objection, so it would be disingenuous to backtrack on its importance in the face of criticism. If the analogy indeed fails for the reasons I have outlined—because it is structured in a way that entails 1 and 2 cancel each other out, whereas the relevant comparison must be a case in which quadrant 2 is more than twice the value of quadrant 1—then the only response Benatar has to this objection is to challenge its underlying assumption that the benefits of existence always compensate for the harms, though this response was shown to be problematic for independent reasons.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, I have suggested that the sick and healthy analogy is illustrative of a more general mistake that Benatar makes when comparing existence and non-existence in his original asymmetry, namely, the mistake of assuming that quadrants 1 and 2 necessarily cancel each other out. Thus, even if the analogy is not necessary to prove the truth of the asymmetry argument, its failure directs our attention to a potential misstep in that argument, i.e., the inference from the fact of the asymmetry to the conclusion that coming into existence is always a net harm, and is therefore significant for that reason.

However, Benatar's second potential objection is to claim that I cannot in fact challenge this inference while accepting the terms of the basic asymmetry, in contrast to my professed argumentative strategy. I have argued in this section that even if we accept the terms of Benatar's asymmetry, coming into existence would constitute a net harm only if existence proved to be more disadvantageous than non-existence is advantageous, that is, if the value of quadrant 3 in Benatar's asymmetry is greater than the combined values of quadrants 1 and 2. The potential problem, however, is that by assuming existence can be more advantageous in cases where quadrant 3 is less than the combined value of quadrants 1 and 2, I seem to be implying that the absence of benefits in non-existence would be bad, in which case I would be failing to pay due regard to the basic asymmetry. However, there are two further responses to this second objection. First, even if it is sound, it would at best show that I have strayed from my professed argumentative strategy, not that the asymmetry argument succeeds. Indeed, if it is implausible to claim that a scenario with a net value of x can be preferable to a scenario with a value of $2x + n$ (where n is a positive integer), then the argument in this section could simply be repurposed as an additional argument against P1, or as one that casts aspersion on the plausibility of the asymmetry itself.

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[40]Of course, we can never know ahead of time how the harms of existence will stack up against its benefits, and there are therefore epistemic limitations to making this type of comparison prospectively with respect to people who does not yet exist (though we can still make the comparison retrospectively with respect to people who already exist). Benatar has argued that in the midst of this uncertainty, to bring a child into existence and expose them to even a miniscule chance of grave suffering is "to engage in a kind of Russian roulette, but one in which the 'gun' is aimed not at oneself but instead at one's offspring" (2015, Benatar and Wasserman, p. 65). This is a defensible view, though it is part of a distinct family of risk-based arguments for anti-natalism that merit further consideration elsewhere.

[41]See Benatar's responses to Metz and Brill, op. cit., note 4, pp. 134–135 and 141–142, respectively. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to respond to these objections directly in my discussion of P2.

[42]Benatar (2006), op. cit., note 2, p. 43.

[43]Benatar (2012), op. cit., note 4, pp. 141–142.

[44]Benatar (2006), op. cit., note 2, p. 47.

Second, and more importantly, it is not obvious that the objection is sound. Benatar's objection to the above strategy is based on the idea that "If one accepts [the] asymmetry it makes no sense to then judge the absence of [benefit] for the never existing person by the standards of absent [benefits] for an existing person."[45] However, it is not clear that the above strategy is guilty of this judgment. To judge the absence of benefit for a never existing person by the standards of absent benefits for an existing person would be to claim that the former absence is bad, though it is important to note that I have not made this claim. Rather than claiming that the absence of benefit is bad in non-existence, I have conceded for the sake of argument that it is *not* bad, but have argued that *how good* the absence of harm can be in non-existence will depend on how the presence of that harm in existence would have been offset by the presence of benefit. This type of argument need not entail that the absence of benefits in non-existence is bad, though it does entail that scenario B can be less good than scenario A. And as Smuts has rightly pointed out in his own critique of Benatar, "something that is not bad can still be less good than an alternative."[46]

5 | REJECTING P3

Suppose, however, that I am mistaken once again, and that Benatar's asymmetry does entail that coming into existence is always comparatively worse than never existing, such that a person is always harmed by being brought into existence. Would this fact on its own entail that procreation is always wrong?

It might if we assume that it is always wrong to make another person comparatively worse off, though there is no good reason to make that assumption. While harming and wronging often go together—there are many cases in which it is wrong to make a person worse off—they also come apart, such that we can make a person worse off without wronging them, and wrong a person without making them worse off. Thus, the bare fact that a person is made comparatively worse off by being brought into existence is not sufficient to establish that it is always wrong to procreate. In order to establish that claim, additional argumentation is required to show that a moral entitlement of theirs has been violated, though it is difficult to see how Benatar could supply that type of argument without saying something substantive about how bad a typical human life is, and how good a life people are entitled to live. Of course, Benatar says a lot about how bad a typical human life is in the context of his distinct quality of life argument, though the point is that he does not do so in the context of his asymmetry argument, suggesting that the asymmetry argument must in fact rely on the quality of life argument to generate its anti-natalist conclusion.

Benatar might respond by claiming the bare fact that existence is inferior to non-existence is sufficient to show that procreation is

wrongful, for it implies that prospective parents fail to act in their children's best interests by bringing them into existence. This is an intelligible response to the objection raised against P3, though it depends on the claim that parents are always required to act in their children's best interests. This claim is controversial, however, and significantly out of accordance with more plausible interpretations of parental role morality. Parents often—perhaps usually—fail to optimize their children's interests, though as long as they promote their children's interests above a minimum standard of decency, we do not normally think their children have a legitimate moral complaint against them just because they could have been made better off than they currently are. By parity of reasoning, even if children are made comparatively worse off by being brought into existence, so long as their existence meets a minimum standard of decency—defined, perhaps, as one in which the goods outweigh the bads, or as one that contains certain objective goods[47]—they may not have a legitimate complaint against their parents just because they could have been better off than they currently are.[48] Thus, in order to establish that it is always wrong to procreate, Benatar has to do more than show that existence is comparatively worse than non-existence; he also needs to show that existence is a worse state than people are entitled to be in.

6 | ASYMMETRY OR QUALITY OF LIFE?

In the latest restatement of his view, Benatar seems to concede this point, arguing that while the asymmetry argument is sufficient to show that coming into existence is always a harm, "it is not sufficient to show that bringing someone into existence is always *wrong*."[49] That latter claim, he alleges, is supported by his distinct quality of life argument, which is designed to show just how bad a typical human life really is. According to Benatar, once we take adequate stock of the non-comparatively harmful aspects of human existence, we will agree that even the best human lives are sufficiently bad to render procreation wrongful.

It is beyond the scope of this article to consider this distinct argument in detail, though by way of conclusion, it is worth making two general points about the relationship between the asymmetry argument and the quality of life argument in Benatar's overall case
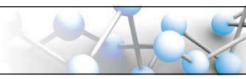
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[45]Benatar (2012), op. cit., note 4, p. 135.

[46]Smuts, op. cit., note 29, p. 719.

[47]Elsewhere I defend the view that all possible future children have a right to be born into conditions in which their basic welfare interests can be satisfied, including their interest in adequate health, nutrition, shelter, protection from neglect and abuse, and access to adequate parental care, among others. See Magnusson, E. (2018). Children's rights and the non-identity problem. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, online first, https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2018.1463798.

[48]They may, of course, have a different type of complaint rooted in different moral considerations, e.g., that their parents have exposed them to a non-comparatively harmful state without their consent and without an appropriate child-centered justification. For this influential consent-based argument, see Shiffrin, S. V. (1999). "Wrongful life, procreative responsibility, and the significance of harm. *Legal Theory*, 5(2), 117–148. Interestingly, Rivka Weinberg has recently objected to Shiffrin's account with a similar argumentative strategy, arguing that because children are unable to offer morally binding consent, bringing a child into existence is akin to other paternalistic interventions that are normally taken to be permissible. Weinberg, R. (2015). *The risk of a lifetime: How, when, and why procreation may be permissible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, esp. pp. 134–150.

[49]Benatar (2015a), op. cit., note 3, p. 40.

for anti-natalism. First, while Benatar initially presents them as independent arguments, we can now see that the asymmetry argument relies on the quality of life argument in at least two important ways. First, the quality of life argument is necessary to establish the claim, crucial to the truth of P2, that the benefits of life are always outweighed by the harms. If this claim is not established, then Benatar's asymmetry cannot generate the conclusion that coming into existence is always a net harm, as per the argument presented above. Second, something like the quality of life argument is also necessary to support the claim that in addition to being harmful, bringing a person into existence is also wrongful, and that we should therefore refrain from having children. Because it is possible to make a person comparatively worse off without wronging them, establishing the worseness of existence relative to non-existence is not sufficient to support this strong normative conclusion.

This, however, leads to a second point about the relationship between the two arguments: while the asymmetry argument relies on the truth of the quality of life argument, the truth of the quality of life argument would seem to render the asymmetry argument unnecessary. Indeed, if it is the non-comparative badness of human existence that explains why procreation is wrongful, rather than its comparative worseness to non-existence, then it is not clear what role the asymmetry argument is playing in Benatar's overall case for anti-natalism.[50] The heavy lifting, it seems, is being done entirely by the quality of life argument, suggesting that this argument should be the primary focus of critics going forward.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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[50]Wasserman (2015a), op. cit., note 3, pp. 151–152, has recently raised this concern.