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Quality of Life Assessments, Cognitive Reliability, and Procreative Responsibility

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Recent work in the psychology of happiness has led some to conclude that we are unreliable assessors of our lives and that skepticism about whether we are happy is a genuine possibility worth taking very seriously. I argue that such claims, if true, have worrisome implications for procreation. In particular, they show that skepticism about whether many if not most people are well positioned to create persons is a genuine possibility worth taking very seriously. This skeptical worry should not be confused with a related but much stronger version of the argument, which says that all human lives are very bad and not worth starting. I criticize the latter stance, but take seriously the former stance and hope it can be answered in future work.

Introduction

Recent work in the psychology of happiness indicates that people are generally quite happy with their lives (Larsen and Eid 2008; Diener and Diener 1996).[1] It is tempting to celebrate, as opposed to analyze, evidence that most people are happy. But other factors should lead us to wonder about these results, and to wonder specifically about the causes of our optimistic life assessments. For instance, car accident victims who become paraplegic

[1] Consider: "By the end of the 1980's, nearly 800 articles cited 'wellbeing' 'happiness' or 'life satisfaction' in published abstracts. From these studies, one finding stands out: most people in the industrial world consider themselves reasonably happy, contrary to a tradition of writers who rejected the possibility of widespread happiness" (Meyer and Diener 1997, 174). More recent research confirms that, despite some cultural variation, most people are happy (Biswas-Diener, Vittersø, and Diener 2005). Of course, there are different kinds of criticisms that one might level against happiness research. But my goal here is not to defend happiness research, only to explore its implications on the assumption that its core findings are reliable.

often become happy again after only a year.[2] Other research indicates that almost nothing bad affects most of us beyond three months (Suh, Diener, and Fujita 1996), that we merely sense that negative events will have long-term impact (Gilbert et al. 1998). This problem, known in psychology as the problem of affective forecasting, suggests that we are bad at predicting what will make us happy. But there is a more serious problem lurking than our inability to accurately predict our future mental states. After all, events like becoming paraplegic,[3] and many more common ones, seem to be objectively huge losses. This matters because depending on how many bad events life presents us with we will have reason for thinking that our life assessments are unreliable and even deeply deceptive measures of how our lives go. Our beliefs about our lives will not, to borrow a concept from Robert Nozick, be truth-tracking.

I am not alone in raising the worry that our quality of life assessments might be unreliable. David Benatar (2006) draws on similar research to argue that we are radically deceived about our wellbeing. In particular, Benatar thinks that our biases prevent us from seeing that all of our lives are bad and that procreation is always immoral—and this, we are told, even if we reject his much better-known argument that the benefits of existence *couldn't* counterbalance its harms.[4] Elizabeth Harman, though she does not go as far as Benatar, concedes that our lives are worse than we think (2009, 777). Despite her concession, though, Harman remains rather optimistic overall and seems to think that procreation is rarely unjustified.[5] My task will be to consider a third option that has been entirely neglected in the debate so far. This option, which takes the form of a dilemma, goes as follows.

> **DILEMMA:** We just aren't well positioned to assess our own lives, in many cases, never mind the lives of future people. Or if we are, many if not most lives come out neither good nor bad, but extremely morally mixed, much more so than people tend to appreciate. Either way, substantive worries for procreation emerge, at least in very many cases.

My claim won't be that this skeptical position is true, only that it is a genuine possibility worth taking seriously—and is at any rate notably more plau-

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2 See Dan Gilbert's TED Lecture "The Surprising Science of Happiness." Also see Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman (1978).

3 Note that this need not imply that being born paraplegic or otherwise disabled is tragic.

4 Here I am referring to Benatar's well-known asymmetry argument (2006, ch. 2). By contrast, the implications of happiness research for procreative ethics remain uncharted. As Benatar recently put it, "Very few of my critics have responded to my quality-of-life argument—a second argument for my anti-natalist conclusion" (2013, 141).

5 For instance, Harman finds it plausible to say that "even a life beset by cancer at a young age is well worth living because of the good experiences it contains" (2009, 786).

sible than Benatar's approach. If I am right, then the most plausible quality of life based challenge to procreation is going to be along the lines of the dilemma above. In addition, if I am right, then we optimists have much work ahead of us before we can hope to justify our views.

1. Preliminaries

Let me begin with some caveats. First, when I use the term 'happiness' in this paper I will often have in mind life satisfaction. This is roughly what psychologists are seeking to test when they ask subjects to answer various questions about how satisfied they are with their lives[6]—though less cognitive tests ask subjects, not about their lives as a whole, but about how they feel on various occasions (Schimmack, Diener, and Oishi 2002; Kahneman 1999). My claim is not that such accounts are problem free (Haybron 2005; Feldman 2008a)[7], only that our life satisfaction may be notably higher than our environments warrant. Since I think a version of this problem emerges on any plausible conception of happiness, including emotional state conceptions and hedonistic conceptions, I will focus here not on how best to define happiness, but on how different views of happiness can get us into trouble.

Second, I am assuming with many philosophers that happiness, subjectively conceived as a mental state or a judgment about life, and wellbeing, conceived as an objective condition, are distinct. But one might wonder whether these things can come apart too far. A version of this worry finds

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6 For example consider the following Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS) from Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985).

1 = Strongly Disagree	_____1. In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
2 = Disagree	_____2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
3 = Slightly Disagree	_____3. I am satisfied with life.
4 = Neither Agree or Disagree	_____4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
5 = Slightly Agree	
6 = Agree	_____5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.
7 = Strongly Agree	

For a philosophical account of life satisfaction that has interesting connections to the psychological accounts see Sumner (1996).

7 Some skepticism about whole life judgments is understandable. For although there is something good about letting people decide for themselves what matters in life, many people have shifting standards. For instance, consider an example due to Haybron. Imagine you start out with a six out of seven on a life satisfaction scale. If you get a serious illness, your wellbeing may go down, but you nonetheless might become more satisfied with your life, given your new outlook on life. But then what is a six out of seven, exactly? Also, when it comes to whole-life judgments factors like the weather on a particular Tuesday may have notable bearing on how we see our entire lives. Yet such factors clearly shouldn't count that much. On the other hand, the latter errors may get weeded out in sufficiently large samples at the population level, where one person's rainy days get counterbalanced by another's sunny days.

support in the following remarks from David Velleman, which appear in a work on suicide:

> I think that we generally ought to defer to a person on the question whether his life is worth living, since the living-worthiness of a life measures the extent to which the continuation of that life would be good for the person living it. The person living a life is the best judge of the value that its continuation would afford him—not an infallible judge, of course, but usually more reliable than anyone else is likely to be. Indeed, his judgment of this value is to some extent self-fulfilling, since his merely liking or disliking aspects of his life can to some extent make them good or bad for him (1999, 608).

There is something plausible about these claims. People are often better positioned than outsiders to judge their lives, and how well a life goes may, in part, be a function of one's beliefs about one's life. But all of this, note, is compatible with the claim that people in general are unreliable assessors of their lives and that we could learn about this empirically. For the judgment that one's life goes well, though arguably an important ingredient of wellbeing, is not sufficient for wellbeing. As with various kinds of judgments about happiness (Haybron 2008), moreover, it is further capable of being false, subject to bias, or otherwise epistemically defective—at least, that is, if we assume that there are objective dimensions to wellbeing, as I shall be doing here. A similar point can be made about our feelings. Although we should not assume that our feelings about life will always align with our judgments about life (Kahneman and Deaton 2010), our feelings might fail to be transparent or fitting.[8]

Finally, it is worth clarifying that although Benatar's quality of life challenge to procreation is global and concerns everyone, the challenge I develop here is more local and more epistemically modest. The advantage of the latter approach is that it is intrinsically more plausible than Benatar's strong approach[9] and, as we shall see, more likely given our present data.

2. Psychological Immunity and Optimistic Biases

In this section, I'll explore various biases that help to explain our optimistic judgments and feelings about life. Many of these biases are discussed by Ben-

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8 In other words, we can assign some weight to our judgments, attitudes, and feelings about life, just because they are ours, and still ask questions about whether we are doing well, all things considered.

9 Just as it would be harder to show that there is, in fact, no external world than it would be to show that (many) people lack knowledge that there is, so too Benatar's global and largely ontological approach starts out less likely than my local and largely epistemic approach. The stronger and more specific one's hypothesis is, in other words, the more likely it is to make a mistake.

atar. Others are not, but might be thought to help his case. The first bias, alluded to earlier, concerns perceived impact of negative events.

> **Negative Impact Bias**: a tendency to see negative events as notably less bad shortly after their occurrence.

As mentioned, despite our expectations to the contrary, terrible events typically stop emotionally affecting most of us after three months.[10] Of course, if you tell individuals that they won't likely be all that upset much beyond three months if they lose their jobs, fail to receive tenure, or perhaps even lose their legs, they won't likely believe you. This is because people are typically unaware that they have a kind of 'psychological immune system' that regulates their subjective sense of wellbeing (Gilbert et al. 1998). The claim here is not that everyone's baseline happiness starts out the same, only that most tend to adapt fairly quickly, springing back to their individual or natural level of happiness, which for most is fairly positive. As one team of authors put it, "Most people are reasonably happy most of the time, and most events do little to change that for long" (Ibid., 618).

Now clearly there are going to be some benefits to resilience, which preserves us from much suffering.[11] But there is also something normatively troubling about how adaptation keeps us out of touch with certain truths about value. One example explored by Dan Moler (2007) concerns spousal death and how living partners are often shockingly quick to re-marry or to find themselves in exciting new relationships. Indeed, many are quite prepared to move on after only a few months and sometimes less. The implication, as Moler notes, is that we seem incapable of holding our dead spouses in the regard they deserve, which does seem to devalue them.

I agree with Moler that our psychological immune system can lead us to devalue others in their deaths, though I am interested in whether it also leads us to overvalue our own lives by keeping us from appreciating the devastating nature of life's tragedies. True, part of what's bad about negative events, again, just is our reaction to them. But objective harms can remain even when people claim to be doing fine again. For instance, most of us are deeply uncomfortable with the notion of happy slaves, happy victims of poverty, or happy grass counters. And while we may admire Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost* for concluding that "The mind is its own place, and in it self Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (1.254–255), we also worry that nobody outside of hellish contexts would reason this way.

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10 I realize that there will be painful counter examples that some could point to in their own lives. As is generally the case, these studies seek to make general claims about how most people react to most negative events.

11 Hedonists in particular might be happy to learn that we suffer less than we otherwise would. On the other hand, as we shall see, adaptation also robs us of much pleasure.

This last point warrants our attention. Many of us, after all, think that the lives of people who enter into an experience machine take a serious turn for the worse, and this despite the positive experiences such a machine affords them. Rarely do we consider that we ourselves might be in a similar predicament, not because we are in a machine that keeps us from objective contact with other persons or events, but because the kind of minds we possess keep us from properly seeing the negative side of our general predicament in *this* world. Equally rarely do we entertain the purely skeptical hypothesis that we are often not well positioned to assess our lives.

Benatar discusses our impact bias and adaptive capacities, though his main concern is over a phenomenon called Pollyannaism. This phenomenon, which goes beyond our general immunity to long-term loss, may be expressed as follows:

> **Pollyannaism or Positive Bias**: a bias that leads us to focus on the good more than the bad and to interpret whatever happens to us (or at any rate much of what happens to us) as being for the best.

No doubt some bad events do lead to new and better opportunities. But even when this is not plausibly the case, many still feel that it is. To see a dramatic example, the original drummer for the Beatles is apparently glad that he was dropped from the band early on before they made it, since this freed him up to pursue other projects that made him happier than he would otherwise have been.[12] Now many will find such claims difficult to take seriously, seeing them as clear evidence of self-deception. Part of what is going on here may have to do with a status quo bias, which leads us to prefer the way things are simply because they are familiar to us (Bostrom and Ord 2006). But beyond this, people often look back on tragic circumstances with a sense of thankfulness, whether following breakups, jail time, or missed opportunities.

Even where we are less than thankful for the bad things that befall us, though, it is important to keep in mind that "positive events are more frequently recalled than negative events" (Myers and Diener 1997, 174). It is not just the past that we might be mistaken about, however. Some neuroscientific data indicate that most of us fail to properly update our beliefs in response to negative information about our future prospects or risks, finding it easier to process good news about ourselves than bad news (Sharot, Korn, and Dolan 2011).

Another bias worth mentioning in connection with Pollyannaism, but which gets unfortunately overlooked in discussions about happiness, stems from the cognitive science of religion and in particular from something called existential theory of mind (EToM). Unlike theory of mind (ToM), which permits us to ascribe mental states to other persons, EToM leads us to judge, rather personally, that our lives are supposed to go as they do

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[12] This example comes from Dan Gilbert.

(Bering 2002), that the bad events we face take place against the backdrop of meaningful and directed life narratives. This brings about a perceived teleological dimension to our suffering, one that goes beyond merely seeing our suffering in a positive light—and one that is consistent with a natural tendency to believe in afterlife (Bering and Bjorklund 2004).

> **EToM Bias**: a bias that leads us to think that life's events happen for a reason (i.e. to think that the way our lives unfold has an objective and worthy purpose that we may not fully understand).

EToM experiences ought to concern those interested in the psychology of happiness. The reason for this is that EToM experiences often function not just to soften tragedies, but also to give a sense of ultimate meaning in life. In the words of Jesse Bering:

> I define EToM, in a purposively general sense, as a biologically based, generic explanatory system that allows individuals to perceive meaning in certain of life's events. . . . (e.g., 'I was in a bad car accident when I was a teenager because I needed to learn that my life is fragile) (Ibid., 4).

It is important to see that EToM experiences, as a feature of human cognition, are had not just by the deeply religious, but often by the non-religious as well. As such, it is not surprising that Bering, a self-described atheist, claims to have EToM experiences, while explicitly affirming that there is no grand reason for any of life's events. The relevance for our discussion should be clear: EToM experiences plausibly make many much more optimistic and hopeful than they would otherwise be, and so have the potential to be highly deceptive. In particular, those who think with Bering and Benatar that our sense of meaning and purpose is entirely illusory face a potentially serious problem here.

Moving along to our fourth bias, we often assume that if we are doing better than others then we are doing well. This judgment seems to fall prey to the following bias:

> **Comparative Success Bias**: a bias that leads us to overlook the difference between doing comparatively well and doing objectively well.

Although certain goods may be essentially comparative or positional—such as being tall—many other goods seem to be different. Benatar's most compelling example here concerns death: many people assume that one does well to live to a hundred, not because a hundred years is ideal in absolute terms, but because it seems like a long life relative to most members of our species (2006, 82). But at least those of us who think that wellbeing admits of non-comparative dimensions cannot just assume that our lives go well because they go better than the lives of most other people we are aware of in history or around the world. To better understand the worry in question, it is helpful to consider Figure 1.

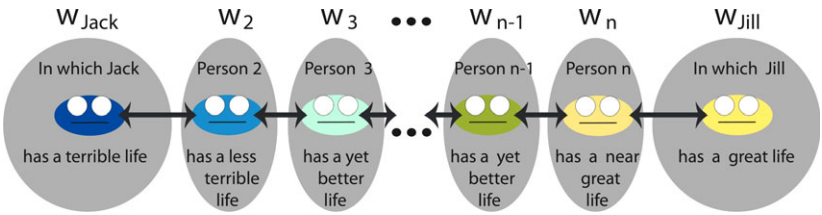

Figure 1. Spectrum of Good and Bad Lives[13]

If the above illustration is thought to depict the spectrum of all present human lives, it might be thought that most lives will fall somewhere between W_3 and W_{n-1}. Given this standard, many will reasonably think of their own lives as falling closer to Jill's than to Jack's. But now the question arises: Why assume this particular standard of comparison? After all, there may be type-2 civilizations or future humans who have lives that are much better than ours. Perhaps these individuals live several thousand years and have found ways of overcoming depression, boredom, and disease, exchanging these for radically enhanced experiences, life projects, and relationships. Why don't these beings provide the relevant class of comparison? Or what about purely possible beings whose lives would make ours look rather unfortunate? If there are super objective facts about how our lives go, our local comparative success bias does not make it easy to worry about those facts.

Finally, the claim that we are deeply biased when performing quality of life judgments is confirmed in a general way by the presence of a Lake Wobegon effect. This effect occurs when most people in a group place themselves above average with respect to some factor. Since this is not strictly a bias, but an effect of other biases, I will call this the Lake Wobegon Happiness Effect.

> **Lake Wobegon Happiness Effect**: a common tendency for people not just to think that they are happy, but to think that they are happier than most other people.[14]

A similar error is often said to affect drivers and teachers: most of us allegedly think that we are far better than average and yet we cannot all be right. In fact, that people's confidence regarding some feature of themselves often fails to budge even when they are informed about the presence of a Lake Wobegon effect (Sharot, Korn, and Dolan 2011; Kruger and Dunning 1999) only confirms the presence of widespread cognitive unreliability in the relevant domains. This matters, finally, since even if rationality permits us to restrict our quality of life comparisons to other humans at the present

[13] This illustration is due to Caspar Hare (2013, 144).

[14] One example of this concerns relationship satisfaction (Buunk 2001).

time, which some might question as arbitrary, the present effect suggests that many may wrongly rank their lives closer to Jill's life than to Jack's.

3. Life's Minuses, Evolution, and Affective Ignorance

The aforementioned biases do not, by themselves, undermine optimism about wellbeing. For it's possible that one could suffer from these biases and nonetheless find oneself in an amazing environment. When combined with other data, however, we are more likely to get a debunking challenge for our optimistic outlooks. Consider first life's minuses. Life presents us with very bad things: we get depressed, we get cancer, we often fail to get what we want, and we must eventually lose everything, including those who brought us into existence. Given the severity of these things, it might be wondered how our quality of life assessments could be high in the absence of serious biases. Part of the answer here is surely that we fail to fully appreciate the badness of life's harms, including their uneven distribution across a life.

Take the evils of aging, for instance. Though plagued by unfortunate social and gendered dimensions (Callahan 1999), some aspects of aging just seem bad for all of us (Overall 2003).[15] It might be thought, given bodily decay and the increasing number of funerals we attend as we age, that the elderly would be uniquely depressed. But it is interesting to learn that, on the contrary, many people feel happier as they become older (Carstensen and Mikels 2005; Kennedy, Mather, and Carstensen 2004; Mather and Carstensen 2005). To be sure, the optimism of the elderly is perhaps best understood against the backdrop of midlife depression and childhood joys, which are part of the so-called U curve theory of happiness. But one can easily imagine a skeptic asking the following question: Why, if we are reliable assessors of our lives, doesn't our depression evenly worsen as we age, and just as soon as we leave childhood?[16] And why, if the worst harms we will face likely lie in the future, when our health starts to go, are we so confident about life's overall goodness now?

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15 For example, we typically cannot even maintain let alone improve many of our capacities as we age. In this respect, Arnold Schwarzenegger's recent testimony can seem sobering:

> "I feel terrific about where I am in my life, when I look back at what I've accomplished," the former governor tells Lloyd Grove. "But I feel so sh*tty when I look at myself in the mirror…I'm not competing, I'm not ripping off my shirt and trying to sell the body," the former governor frets. "But when I stand in front of the mirror and really look, I wonder: What the f*ck happened here? Jesus Christ. What a beating!" (http://ca.news.yahoo.com/arnold-schwarzenegger-sad-he-is-not-young-anymore.html, Accessed 2 March 2014)

16 Such a question seems particularly pressing if the Romantics were right that our wellbeing plummets as we move from childhood to adulthood.

Serious harms aside, we perhaps especially fail to appreciate the mild and mundane minuses in life, something that Benatar nicely draws our attention to. For instance, we tend to overlook the thousands of hours of boredom that we have all experienced; the fact that we are often too hot or too cold; that we often need to relieve ourselves, whether this be through going to the bathroom or scratching an itch. And yet these factors, when added up, may have significant impact on how our lives actually go. (If we were anywhere nearly as harsh as the average movie critic in assessing the narratives of our lives the results might be sobering.)

To be sure, just how serious the problem is will depend on one's prior theory of wellbeing. But I am willing to grant Benatar's claim that the biases in question, when combined with the harms of existence, create a worry on any of the main conceptions of wellbeing—whether mental state accounts, desire fulfillment accounts, objective list accounts, and we might add, authentic life satisfaction accounts. In fact, although I am not convinced that we yet have a good theory of wellbeing, any theory on which the harms and biases we have been discussing made little to no difference would be a deeply suspicious theory. This is because life clearly contains many minuses.

In addition to whether our life satisfaction is properly calibrated with our wellbeing, another question concerns how good we are at knowing our emotional conditions. Dan Haybron has forcefully argued that it is a real possibility that "we often do not know whether we are happy" (2007, 395). The worry here concerns our ignorance both of past and present affective states, including their hedonic quality. As Habyron notes, when it comes to moods and mood-like states such as anxiety, these are often wholly elusive to us, and yet these states can strongly influence the quality of our experience. If Haybron is right that we are prone to serious errors in the self-assessment of affect, then notice that even Benatar overestimates our introspective capacities when he asserts that "one cannot be mistaken about whether one is, right now, experiencing a positive or negative mental state" (2006, 74). A bit more particularly, even if we are good at detecting some negative mental states, such as sharp physical pains,[17] we might be bad at detecting other states, such as those just mentioned.

In addition, once we start to introspect more carefully and more regularly, we may find that we are often not doing so well. Here Habyron cites a study of random assessments of emotional happiness in which "the average participant experienced [negative] emotions more than a third of the time" (2007, 410). Haybron rightly adds, "This seems rather high. How happy can someone be who spends a third of her day being sad, angry, afraid, stressed, fatigued, or exhausted?"

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[17] Though for an argument against the transparency of pain see Williamson (2000, 24–25).

I find Haybron's arguments—which have been curiously neglected in previous discussions about happiness research and procreation—plausible. I also find them troubling, since uncertainty about emotional happiness could contribute to uncertainty about wellbeing.[18] Instead of exploring Haybron's arguments in detail, though, let me briefly flag a possible Darwinian dimension to the problem. The issue here concerns our theoretical grounds for trusting our optimistic life assessments and feelings prior to looking at the above data. This worry, though briefly mentioned by Benatar, is nicely stated by Sharon Street:

> Different evaluative tendencies, then, can have extremely different effects on a creature's chances of survival and reproduction. . . . In particular, we can expect there to have been overwhelming pressure in the direction of making those evaluative judgements which tended to promote reproductive success (such as the judgement that one's life is valuable), and against making those evaluative judgements which tended to decrease reproductive success (such as the judgement that one should attack one's offspring) (2006, 113–114).

This "overwhelming pressure" in the direction of optimism and procreation, when combined with the claim that there is no a priori guarantee that our lives will come out good, is worth reflecting on for a moment. Why think that evolution has endowed us with dispositions to form correct value assessments about our lives?[19] If we cannot rule out that our value judgments about life and procreation are highly responsive to the "distorting pressures of Darwinian forces" (Ibid., 109), in other words, then it might be thought that we will start out with less reason to trust those judgments or at least less reason to think those judgments are secure in the face of counterevidence. In raising this worry, note, we need not endorse Street's evolutionary argument against moral realism. We simply need to consider her claim that optimistic views about life could be adaptive but false.

4. First Possible Conclusion: Our Lives Are Bad

One possible response to the above claims is to insist that all of our lives are bad and that life is not worth starting.[20] This is David Benatar's view

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18 In particular, if we think that emotional happiness is a component of overall wellbeing, skepticism about emotional happiness will support skepticism about wellbeing.

19 This question is particularly pressing, I should add, if we grant Street's assumption, also made by Benatar, that evolution is unguided. Of course, some will resist this naturalistic assumption and will insist that certain supernatural views could avoid the present reliability challenge. I will set aside these metaphysical issues here, however.

20 Benatar claims that a life can still be worth continuing even if it was not worth starting, which helps him to resist worries about global suicide. He also claims, for the sake of argument, that even if some lives end up being good enough to have started, these lives are so rare that parents would never be justified in starting them, given the risks.

and it rests on the following evidence, much of which will now be familiar: a) optimistic life assessments are unreliable; b) we overlook how much harm there is around the world; c) our lives come out bad on the three main theories of wellbeing, namely hedonistic views (we are seriously mistaken about pleasure and pain ratios across a life), desire fulfillment views (most of our desires go unfulfilled), and objective list views (we lack many objective goods and overstate our achievements); d) quality of life is not merely the good minus the bad, since distribution matters to wellbeing and since certain horrors, like being burned, can disqualify a life from being good all by themselves.

So should we endorse Benatar's badness of life thesis? I think the answer is no. My first worry is that such a thesis fails to factor in our total evidence. Life does not just contain harms. It also contains goods. But we haven't considered the evidence for life's goods in any detail and nor has Benatar. Indeed, while Benatar spends much time vigorously discussing the bad things in life, including many disturbing statistics, he spends surprisingly little time describing in careful detail life's goods. It is hardly surprising then that he reaches a highly pessimistic outlook. In fact, it may not be possible to show, in this context, that our lives are bad without a serious discussion of life's goods. We are not discussing Benatar's asymmetry argument, after all. We are discussing his quality of life argument, which is supposed to be largely empirical. But then the details matter.[21]

In response, Benatar might think that he has discussed life's goods, including their distribution, in sufficient detail to justify his thesis. I don't think that he has—and will let the reader judge for herself. Alternatively, Benatar might grant that his focus is largely one sided, but add that this is both intentional and required to get a proper look at our lives and to compensate for our biases. Now such a strategy would arguably be reasonable if the goal were to show that we overstate how good our lives are or to show that a certain degree of skepticism about our wellbeing is in order. It is a bad strategy if the goal is to show that "all lives are bad" or even if the goal is to show that the "overwhelming majority of lives are very bad" (Benatar 2006, 94).

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[21] By analogy, if you wanted to show that planet earth is mostly brown and grey, you could compile a rather impressive list of brown and grey things: trees, deserts, fields, rocks, England's sky, etc. To make your evidential case persuasive, however, you would also need to factor in the evidence we have for blue and green things: lakes, oceans, grass and California's sky, etc. In fact, even granting that distribution matters to wellbeing, we still need to know roughly what quantities of good and bad we are dealing with to properly assess distribution. Similarly, cataloguing several pessimistic facts, like suicide rates, death rates, and rates of violence, won't be evidentially persuasive in the absence of other data.

In fact, focusing too unevenly on the bad—or the good for that matter—can distort the discussion in important ways, by masking how complicated global judgments about wellbeing really are. For instance, consider the following passage in which Benatar seeks to defend his claim that most of our desires go unsatisfied:

> Because we typically want more than we get, more desires are never satisfied. For example, billions of people want to be younger, cleverer, better looking, to have more sex (and to have it with more or better looking people), to have a better job, to be more successful, to be richer, to have more leisure time, to be less susceptible to disease, and to live longer. Even when our desires are satisfied, they are rarely satisfied immediately and often take a very long time to be satisfied. The desires thus remain unsatisfied between when they arise and when they are eventually satisfied. When they are finally satisfied, the satisfaction either lasts or it does not. The latter is more common. Even when the satisfaction of a desire does last, new desires typically emerge. Thus the general pattern is a constant state of desiring punctuated by some relatively short periods of satisfaction (Benatar 2013, 143).

Now I grant that passages like these are highly troubling and provide *some* evidence for Benatar's thesis. The question, however, is whether this evidence (and the general approach of listing bad things) is decisive. To see why it is not, consider the following more optimistic interpretation of desire fulfillment:

> Because we typically get what we want, most desires are satisfied. For example, billions of people want to spend time with their families, to talk to their friends, and to enjoy stories, music, good meals and the outdoors; they also want and get to have some kind of sex and to have some kind of job (which is more important than having even better versions of these things). True, the satisfaction of many, but not all, desires doesn't last, but then you get to have other desires, most of which are fulfilled. You meet new people, visit new websites, cities, restaurants, and the like. Clearly the general pattern for most people, then, is a constant state of desiring and a constant state of getting most of what one desires. In fact, even if we just focused on our capacity to think about what we want to, this alone leads to billions of satisfied desires everyday and could alone outnumber most frustrated desires.

To clarify, I am not endorsing the desire satisfaction theory of wellbeing, nor am I claiming that the above passage justifies optimism—given our biases we should expect to be pulled toward the second passage and there may be important desires, as we saw earlier, that couldn't be satisfied.[22]

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[22] Benatar also makes the point that desires aren't normally fulfilled right away. But that isn't always a problem (for instance, I have heard about studies claiming that we get even more pleasure from planning a trip than from the trip itself).

I am merely pointing out that the relative ease with which we can construct optimistic and pessimistic interpretations of our lives should give both pessimists and optimists pause. Maybe the truth about our wellbeing is much more ambiguous than typical discussions about optimism and pessimism assume.

I think there are other problems with Benatar's case for pessimism.[23] Since my goal is not to provide an exhaustive critique of Benatar, though, but to open up a new line of reasoning about wellbeing and procreation, let me just mention a couple of empirical constraints on radical pessimism. My first worry concerns adaptation: we don't just adapt to bad things, we also adapt to good things, taking many of them for granted. Indeed the lesson of the so-called hedonic treadmill is that it is hard to stay satisfied for too long, which explains why we do not just get used to serious car accidents, but also to winning lotteries. A second worry concerns comparative judgments. Our lives could get much, much worse, and not just much, much better; that is, we could compare ourselves to past humans and devils and not just to posthumans and angels, etc.

Perhaps the real lesson, in other words, is that we are unreliable in two different directions: we both underestimate life's minuses and, in many cases, underestimate life's goods. That is, adaptation robs us of both lasting suffering and of lasting pleasure, causing each of us to revert back to a mean state, whose objective value remains largely elusive. Turning to comparative assessments of wellbeing, we often do not know which comparisons to make or to rely on.

Benatar is clearly aware of the two-sided nature of adaptation and comparative assessment. Why, then, isn't he just a skeptic about wellbeing as opposed to a firm believer in life's badness? Why doesn't he just say that we are all too riddled with biases to even make an objective judgment about our lives? Benatar seems to think that Pollyannaism or Positive Bias can get us all the way to pessimism. He states, for instance, that our optimism bias shows that we both adapt and make favorable comparative assessments from an already optimistic baseline (2006, 68). If he is right, then our ability to make locally reliable judgments about which countries are happiest is not a good

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[23] First, Benatar and his critics seem to overlook just how difficult it might be to know how good or bad a life is since there is a serious question about whether various good and bad things can even be compared (the problem of value incommensurability). Second, the apparent inference that if our lives can be shown to be bad on the main theories of wellbeing then they are probably bad seems rather shoddy to me. It wouldn't at all be surprising if we had a lot more to learn about wellbeing or if our current taxonomy were seriously incomplete (the problem of unconceived alternatives). Third, when it comes to wellbeing thresholds, it is tempting to think that there might be many borderline cases, making universal claims like "all lives are bad" suspicious (the problem of moral vagueness or indeterminacy). Again, Benatar says little, if anything, about these matters, which further detracts from the plausibility of his thesis.

argument for optimism. For Benatar's point is that local reliability means very little if everyone is in reality doing poorly in absolute terms, and if we prefer to compare ourselves to worse off people rather than to better off people.

I grant this last point. But I also think that a strong optimism bias will not get us to pessimism. To see why, consider a worst-case scenario. Suppose that our positive bias would lead us to believe that our lives are good, even if this belief were false—and indeed even if our lives were bad. That is suppose that, when it comes to the belief that our lives go well, in the nearest (or most similar) worlds in which this belief is false, we would still believe it to be true. Now the idea that our beliefs about our lives are epistemically insensitive to the truth is not crazy. We know, for instance, that some people who undergo several years of captivity and torture end up glad about the experience and think their lives are better for it (Charney 2004).[24] We also know that some of the seemingly worst off people, such as locked-in patients, often claim to be happy (Bruno et al. 2011). Perhaps such persons have insights into the value of suffering and post-traumatic growth that many of us lack (Stump 2010, 458); perhaps it is practically impossible to have a bad life here on earth. But it would not be at all surprising, goes the worry, if the relevant individuals were simply deceived.

Anyhow, even if we grant radical insensitivity for the sake of argument, this outcome, however unsettling,[25] would not show that our lives are bad. To see why, it is helpful to consider an example. In the nearest (or most similar) worlds in which we are in a Matrix, we will still believe that we are not in a Matrix. Our belief that we are not in a Matrix thus is not epistemically sensitive: we'd believe it even if it were false. I hope it is clear that nothing follows about whether we are in fact in a Matrix. Similarly, you cannot show that someone's life is bad by pointing out that her optimistic judgments about life are insensitive to the facts about human wellbeing.

Of course, Benatar's case is cumulative and we still have the Lake Wobegon Happiness Effect and our recall biases to worry about. But factoring in this evidence will not take us all the way to pessimism. Although many teachers and drivers are worse than they think, most who think they are great probably aren't horrible. Similarly, although we overlook many bad things in life,

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24 Consider, for instance, the case of Bob Shoemaker, who was studied by Charney. Despite being imprisoned for eight years in Vietnam, three of which were spent in solitary confinement, and despite being severely tortured, Shoemaker says that he doesn't regret the experience. He states: "Paradoxically, I gained something out of this eight years of experience." He even adds that he would not now eliminate the POW experience if he could. For more on the Shoemaker story see the PBS special "Rethinking Happiness—This Emotional Life." To be sure, it is possible to exaggerate our adaptive capacities. But the more common mistake, it appears, is to underplay them.

25 After all, even if epistemic sensitivity is no longer widely believed to be required for knowledge (Greco 2012; Pritchard 2008; Sosa 1999), it might still be an important epistemic virtue.

we also overlook various goods; for instance, how many decent movies we have watched or how many good conversations with strangers we have had.

Much as I admire Benatar's willingness to take up the question of whether our lives are bad, then, I don't think he is successful. Then again, we have hardly established optimism either. This might be hard to do, moreover; for even if we were to spend more time discussing life's goods, there is also more that we could say about life's minuses. What is more, if EToM is an unreliable process, as many philosophers believe, and if softened versions of Benatar's worries remain, these things alone could create a rather huge blow to human wellbeing.

5. Second Possible Conclusion: A Dilemma

According to another option, contrary to what Benatar and his critics seem to assume, we do not need to show that our lives are bad to raise serious worries for wellbeing. This is because, contrary to what optimists and pessimists will often tell us, we do not have to choose between seeing the glass as either half full or half empty. For it may be that we just aren't well positioned to know how full or empty the glass is. Or it may be that we can see that the glass is clearly both half full and half empty. If either of these views is right, notice that neither optimism nor pessimism is justified.

Benatar, like most academics writing about wellbeing, fails to even acknowledge, let alone test, these other two possibilities against our total evidence. But these possibilities should be tested. More accurately, once we factor in all our present evidence, it can seem plausible to think that we are left having to choose between two sub-optimal options. The first option, and the first horn of the dilemma, is that at least very many of human lives are extremely difficult to assess. That is to say, it may be that the overall wellbeing of many lives is simply beyond our ken or inscrutable.

This claim is worth reflecting on, for although I do not have a precise analysis of what it means for a claim to be inscrutable, I take it that we have an intuitive grasp of this concept. A claim is inscrutable, very roughly, if we are unable to interpret it or to make a confident judgment about it, whether negative or positive. For instance, I am not able to assess whether or not there will be humans on earth in one million years, since the answer to this question seems inscrutable to me. The first part of the dilemma proposes that something similar applies to wellbeing. In many cases, it will be difficult to judge various human lives with any degree of confidence, since the quality of many lives is highly elusive. We have seen various lines of evidence for this view.

The second option, which gives rise to the second horn of the dilemma, is that our lives, or at any rate many of them, are extremely mixed, much more so than people tend to appreciate. According to this view, it is not that our wellbeing is unclear or inscrutable; it is that it is all too clear that human lives

are very often a mixed bag, all things considered, and so far less than good. Such a view might also seem to be well supported by the evidence.

So what does it mean to say of a life that it is highly mixed? Again, I have no precise analysis of the relevant concept to offer. But, again, this may not be necessary since we make reasonable evaluative judgments of highly mixed phenomena all of the time. To revisit the idea of a film, perhaps you're unsure whether to give a certain film 5 or 5.5 rating out of 10; perhaps the very idea of precise numerical evaluations will seem arbitrary and out of place. Despite your uncertainty, though, you might nonetheless make confident judgments about the film. For instance, you might regret having seen the film, but only slightly. Or you might not regret having seen the film, but would not recommend it to others. Or perhaps you'd recommend the film to others, but only barely, warning potential viewers that the price of admission may be too high for those not already predisposed to like the film's contents. On any of these interpretations notice the idea of a mixed bag is hardly good news and hardly gives us reason for celebration.

The worry, given the second horn of the dilemma, is that something similar holds about the value of many human lives. I say 'many' lives here because the dilemma we are constructing needn't be construed as a global challenge to wellbeing, where all lives must be deemed either inscrutable or highly mediocre. Perhaps we can just see that some human lives—say in the very best or in the very worst regions—are good or bad. The point is just that when it comes to very many lives, these might seem either highly inscrutable or highly mediocre.

6. Implications for Procreation

I think the above dilemma, if accurate, has extremely troubling implications for procreation. To see why, consider a widely held view about what justifies procreation from Jeff McMahan:

> What makes procreation morally permissible in most cases is the reasonable expectation that the bads in a possible person's life will be [objectively] outweighed, and significantly outweighed, by the goods (2009, 61).

Let us call this view the counterbalancing justification of procreation. There are various possible variants of such a view, as we shall see. McMahan's version, however, focuses on rational expectation and objective wellbeing. He thinks that if you can rationally predict that a child's life will be, all things considered, good, presumably on various conceptions of wellbeing, then you are likely justified in creating that child.

There is something plausible about the idea that procreators should have a tight epistemic connection to their future child's wellbeing (and this even if many parents fail to reflect on the ethics and epistemology of procre-

ation). The relevant question is what, exactly, such a connection is and how many people can satisfy it. Of course the answer to this question will depend on how phrases like 'reasonable expectation' in the above passage are understood. Regrettably, McMahan says little about this. But it is tempting to think that on many plausible views of rational expectation problems for procreation will emerge given our dilemma.

For instance, if we say that rationality is about probability on the evidence, problems will emerge. For it might seem, given our earlier dilemma, that many future lives cannot be shown to have a sufficiently high conditional probability of being good. The dilemma in question, after all, implies that the probability that a future person will have a good life will often be low or inscrutable. Alternatively, suppose we understand rationality, not in probabilistic terms, but in terms of epistemic justification. One popular view here might be both evidentialist and internalist:

> One is justified in believing p at some time t, only if the belief that p is a suitable response to one's reflectively accessible evidence at time t.

Although there are debates about what counts as evidence, and about whether evidence can be non-inferential, let us grant that perception, intuition and intellectual seemings can all be part of one's evidence. This qualification, aside from making justification easier than it would otherwise be, also seems like a natural upshot of basic cognitive trust (Chisholm 1982). The question, though, is whether basic cognitive trust would remain rational in the present context were parents to become fully informed of their biases. We have seen reason for thinking it would not in many cases.

It is easy to imagine that similar problems would arise on other interpretations of the counterbalancing view of procreation as well. For instance let us turn from justification to knowledge. According to this approach, what makes procreation morally permissible in most cases is the knowledge that the bad things in a possible person's life will be outweighed, and significantly outweighed, by the good things. The relevant question, given this outlook, is naturally how many parents possess the relevant knowledge.

Although it is not my task to fully establish the point—I am mainly talking about McMahan's standard, which concerns rational expectation—I worry that the relevant knowledge might be often difficult to obtain as well. For instance, consider John Greco's virtue reliabilism (2009), according to which knowledge requires cognitive reliability in the following sense.

> A subject S knows p *if and only if* S believes the truth (with respect to p) because S's belief that p is produced by intellectual abilities or virtues.

If knowledge involves 'success from ability', as Greco claims, and so is a kind of cognitive achievement, then there is good reason to think that many

parents lack knowledge that their future children will fare well. This is because, as we saw, many cognitive biases and off-track processes show that people are prone to serious mistakes when assessing their own wellbeing. How much worse, then, will they be at assessing the lives of future persons who do not exist? Indeed, even if parents were generally good at assessing their own lives, it would not follow that they were good at assessing the lives of future people who do not yet exist.[26]

True, perhaps some parents may, in spite of their distorting biases, risky environments, or risky genetic traits, come to have true beliefs about their future children. But the worry is that true belief in this context will often be more attributable to epistemic luck than to success from ability or to stable epistemic virtues; it won't amount to knowledge. (To be sure, there are other popular views of knowledge on offer besides virtue reliabilism and I cannot address every possible view here. Unless we are willing to say that knowledge can come through highly defective memory, powers of inference and other cognitive abilities, though, we seem to be left with a problem.)[27]

Perhaps, in light of these claims, some will wish to set aside worries about knowledge and wellbeing and focus instead on psychological happiness and reasonable expectation. Here it might be claimed that what makes procreation morally permissible is the reasonable expectation that one's child will be notably more satisfied than dissatisfied with her life overall, or at least be disposed to be such. If all that matters in creating is expected life satisfaction, it might be thought that procreation will be rather easy to justify. This is because most people, recall, are disposed to be satisfied with their lives. Indeed, most people are probably biased to want to think of themselves as happy people, particularly in cultures where they are expected to be happy no matter what.

This last claim will be enough to convince many that the life satisfaction account of procreation is implausible. My present point, though, is just that such a view will still generate severe local worries for procreation, albeit

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26 For one thing, knowledge of the future can be hard to come by. Many epistemologists doubt, for instance, that we can know that we will lose the next lottery we play, and this despite the excellent odds of losing. How, then, can parents know that their future child will be fine? Leaving aside general skeptical worries about the future, parents often make specific mistakes when assessing the life prospects of their existing children, including their medical risks (Freckleton, Sharpe, and Mullan 2014), and, it seems, their risks of wishing never to have been born (Cavan 1932). There is no reason to think that similar mistakes wouldn't be duplicated when reasoning about procreation.

27 To consider just one other example: suppose we say with the safety theorist that a subject S knows some true contingent proposition p only if S could not have easily been mistaken about p while relying a similar method of belief formation. It seems like trouble arises on this modal conception of reliability as well. For upon a first glance, anyhow, it looks as though many people's beliefs about their future children could have easily be false, and might in fact be false, in many cases. Their methods of forming their beliefs often do not seem safe from error.

less severe worries than the other views. This is because, despite the general trend toward optimism mentioned earlier, recent international work on subjective wellbeing reveals that some countries have extremely low life satisfaction. In particular, some countries—not always the poor ones mind you (Biswas-Diener et al. 2005)—rank themselves as low as 3.2 out of 10 (Veenhoven 2010, 336). The life satisfaction defense of procreation implies that the great majority of persons in such countries should stop procreating.

Here one could always seek to substitute another view of happiness. According to one option, procreation is justified so long as parents can reasonably expect their children to have a strong preponderance of positive emotions over negative emotions (i.e. affect balance). This move also seems risky. Many, recall, spend much of their day depressed, bored, or anxious. It would be strange to call such persons happy or to assume, in the absence of lots of other information,[28] that their children will be happy. That some psychologists require a greater than 3:1 ratio of positive to negative affect for flourishing (Fredrickson and Losada 2005) only sharpens the problem. If we apply this threshold to different conceptions of happiness, then it will be even harder to be happy or to justify starting lives. Focusing, finally, on hedonic pleasure will not help either, if many are not so good at remembering, predicting, or generally knowing their pain levels across a life—or if many lives can be shown to be marked by nearly as much pain as pleasure.[29]

7. Why Local Procreative Skepticism Is Substantive

Given various ways of filling out the counterbalancing standard of procreation, then, substantive local problems for procreation are going to be difficult to resist. These problems are substantive since, while many already grant that not everyone is well positioned to create, few have appreciated just how many people might be left out. In fact, the only recent exception that I can think of is David DeGrazia. Although DeGrazia does not actually argue for his view, he thinks that procreation is very morally serious and

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[28] It is true, of course, that there are drugs designed to make people feel better emotionally and that parents could know this in advance of creating. But this strategy faces problems of its own (Elliot 2000).

[29] Here the hedonist might note that even in OECD countries 24% of people do not report having more positive experiences in an average day than negative experiences. (http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/life-satisfaction/, accessed 2 May, 2014.) I realize that there are other views of happiness and wellbeing, but I am not confident that these other views would resolve the problem. For instance, if we turn to less sensory versions of hedonism, such as attitudinal hedonism, we will face many of the very same problems that characterize life satisfaction views of happiness. If we go too subjective, focusing on mere enjoyment of things, we still face the worry that some circumstances may not warrant a joyful attitude. If we go too objective, and factor in various authenticity conditions, we face the worry that many people will not be authentically happy.

that millions if not billions of parents should not procreate. Actually, De Grazia seems open to the claim that most people shouldn't procreate (2010, 330).[30]

I have provided a possible foundation for taking such a view seriously, one that stems from a dilemma that others, including DeGrazia, Benatar, and Harman have overlooked. Of course, there may be other possible foundations for procreative skepticism, including more deontological foundations. I suspect that my claims would in reality intensify these more deontological worries about procreation—which concern the ethics of tossing persons into risky and morally demanding predicaments without their consent (Shiffrin 1999; Velleman 2008).[31] Since I am focused mainly on quality of life here, though, let me close by considering some objections to my arguments.

8. Objections

A) Pragmatic Response: "Who Cares about Truth or Wellbeing, I Want Happiness."

Perhaps the most obvious challenge to the above skeptical worries about objective wellbeing is pragmatic. In particular, some might think that I have argued as follows:

1. If we were not deceived about our lives because of our cognitive biases we would be unhappy (or much less happy).
2. Given 1, we must choose between happiness and deception.
3. We should not be deceived.
4. Therefore, we should be unhappy (or much less happy).

We have seen some reason to endorse 1 and 2, but some might question 3. I think there is something to this suggestion, a version of which has been made, somewhat surprisingly, by Robert Nozick. In an interview shortly before his death Nozick claimed that "in particular cases someone might

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30 He states, "Although I cannot adequately defend my judgment here, I believe that many procreative decisions, perhaps a majority of them, are morally irresponsible. With our biologically rooted bias in favor of having children as well as our cultural embrace of procreative liberty and, in some cultures, the presumed imperative of increasing their population, we often have children although we should not. Frequently, we [are not] in a position to say with confidence that our children are likely to have good lives and have their basic needs met" (2010, 330).

31 The worries noted by Shiffrin and Velleman arise, note, even if a child's life can be reasonably expected to be quite good overall. The present paper intensifies their worries since it evidences (1) that procreative risks are more severe than Shiffrin and Velleman realize; and (2) that the only possible form of consent to one's creation—retroactive consent—is not automatically authentic.

actually be better off not believing what's true." So what are Nozick's examples? Interestingly, he points to psychological literature and to the reality that the more accurate our views about what other people think of us, the less happy we will be. Nozick adds, also interestingly, that parents should hide their children from the truth about other people's opinions of them, not to give them an "out-of-touch-with-reality view, but a more optimistic than is actual view, a rosier view…so that their life will go smoother, more easily, and so on" (Sanchez 2001).

Woody Allen agrees with Nozick, noting that "one must have one's delusions to live" since "if you look at life too honestly and too clearly life does become unbearable because it's a pretty grim enterprise."[32] Finally, Owen Flanagan and Tim Lane (2010) have a nice way of putting the point:

> The worry, the rub, for the naturalist is this: We philosophers, beginning in Epistemology 101, teach that "One ought not have false beliefs." But in Psychology 101 the students learn: "If you want to be happy for the rest of your life—have false beliefs!" (2010: 588).

Perhaps, goes the objection, a little deception is not so bad for us. Perhaps it is even good for us, giving rise to 'positive illusions' (Taylor and Brown 1988). No doubt there is something to this claim and to the claim that the truth can be alienating. On the other hand, objectivists like Nozick cannot take this kind of reasoning too far. After all, Nozick gave us the experience machine thought experiment, which has convinced many of us to abandon mental state conceptions of wellbeing, and to conclude that truth matters a great deal to human flourishing.[33] This probably explains why Nozick qualifies that he isn't endorsing an 'out-of-touch-with-reality view' only a 'rosier view' or mild deception.

In any case, there are serious problems with the pro-deception objection. First, Nozick's psychological evidence is rather narrow; once we combine it with all of the evidence we have discussed, we might be left with something closer to an out-of-touch-with-reality view than to a slightly rosier view. Second, even if it would be better overall that we were deceived about our lives, deception might still be bad for us. For it may be that our only two options (deception + happiness or no deception + unhappiness) are both deeply unfortunate, since what we really want (truth + happiness) is beyond reach. Third, the objection that happiness is what we really care about would be much more pressing if it could be shown that there are no

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32 Allen adds "I do feel that [life] is a grim, painful, nightmarish, meaningless experience and that the only way that you can be happy is if you tell yourself some lies and deceive yourself." No doubt Allen exaggerates the nightmare, but his general point is consistent with Nozick's. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8684809.stm, Accessed 2 March 2014.)

33 Some question whether we really care about real things (De Brigard 2010). I will have to pursue this challenge another time.

skeptical worries for happiness in addition to wellbeing.[34] But we saw reasons to question this claim. Fourth, part of our earlier concern, recall, was that people adapt to horrible truths all of the time. In light of this, there is no guarantee that Nozick's advice is even sound.

Finally, it is important to see that Nozick's advice, even if sound, would not overcome skeptical worries about procreation. For it is one thing to say that deception is better for existing beings, whether parents or children, than unhappiness; it is quite another thing to create the kinds of beings who require radical deception in order to be happy.[35]

B) The Moorean Response

I thus doubt that we can call on the above pragmatic argument to escape the problem and think that we should look elsewhere for a defense of optimism. Here the following Moorean response will no doubt be popular.

> **Moorean Response**: That most people clearly have good lives, and that procreation is almost always justified, are facts more obvious than any philosophical arguments that could be raised against them. If some philosophical theory (about wellbeing, procreative ethics, or knowledge) implies otherwise, then so much the worse for that theory, which is clearly defective. True, perhaps science can undermine common sense, but psychologically based arguments for procreative skepticism are ultimately philosophical arguments. And philosophy lacks the authority to radically undermine common sense.

Moorean responses have their appeal in certain moods. And if we think we know much, we are all probably Moorean sometimes (Kelly 2005). The Moorean move also accords nicely with a certain view of the nature and role of skeptical arguments in philosophy. According to this view, skeptical arguments function not to undermine knowledge, but to sharpen our theories of knowledge (Greco 2000). For instance, on this view the move toward externalism in epistemology over the last thirty years was justified because most internalist views historically had intolerable and far-reaching skeptical consequences.

Benatar, unsurprisingly, rejects appeals to common sense in this context as intolerably dogmatic (2006, 203-207). But since he fails to even discuss the literature on Mooreanism or the literature on skepticism, he needs to say more about whether dogmatism is always a vice. For the question that he

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[34] Also, in response to other research suggesting that our subjective happiness declines as we become parents, it is interesting that many philosophers will point to the importance of objective wellbeing to escape that problem. Such philosophers should not now turn around and say that subjective happiness is all that really matters.

[35] After all, prenatal nonexistence, as Benatar will appreciate, is not bad for possible persons and does not deprive them of unhappiness or wellbeing.

and procreative skeptics more generally face is this: If we adopt a revisionist outlook with respect to our most basic views in ethics, how can we avoid skepticism in general? Do procreative skeptics really think that the case for procreative skepticism is categorically more impressive than the case for all traditional forms of skepticism, such as external world skepticism or inductive skepticism, which we take ourselves as rightly rejecting? Until we are given a principled way of deciding when skepticism can be rejected, or when dogmatism is a vice, the Moorean move might not be as silly as some think.

On the other hand, we may have a principled reason for rejecting Mooreanism in this context. Procreation, as Benatar will appreciate, is a high-stakes case; it involves imposing vast amounts of unchosen suffering, and not just goods, on unconsenting persons. If some authors are right that high stakes can make knowledge harder to obtain than low stakes (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008), then the knowledge that procreation is justified might be harder to obtain than we thought. Since no similar practical considerations apply to most traditional forms of skepticism, it may be possible to be a Moorean in contexts of metaphysics and epistemology without being a Moorean in moral contexts. This makes me inclined to reject the Moorean response to procreative skepticism, particularly in the case of local procreative skepticism, which is less strongly opposed to common sense than global procreative skepticism.

C) The Moral Response

Another response to procreative skepticism comes not from epistemology but from ethics. Some ethicists will claim that McMahan sets the bar too high when he discuses how to justify procreation. In particular, advocates of the zero line view of procreative responsibility think that procreation is permissible so long as a child's existence is expected to be worthwhile, even barely worthwhile (Glover 2006, 58-63). Since it is not obvious even once we factor in our biases, goes the objection, that many lives are not even barely worth living, the zero line advocate might not feel too threatened by the claim that many lack reason to think that their child's life will likely be good.

Again, this response is worth mentioning, but as with the Moorean response, it, too, can seem less than satisfactory. For instance, the zero line view implies that it would be permissible to bring a slave child into existence, provided that her life would be barely worthwhile (Kavka 1982, 100). It also implies that fourteen-year-old couples can permissibly create and raise children, since even if such children can be expected to have bad starts in life, they will likely have minimally worthwhile lives overall (Parfit 1986, 358).

Perhaps the zero line advocate could point to Derek Parfit's non-identity problem to argue that the relevant children have no real complaint against their parents, since the only real alternative for them was likely nonexistence. Perhaps she could further point to the value of procreative liberty to make her case. Despite these considerations, though, most procreative ethicists appear to reject the zero line view (Marsh forthcoming; Hare 2013; Harman 2009; McMahan 2009; Savulescu and Kahane 2009; Velleman 2008; Benatar 2006; Glover 2006, 58-63; Archard 2004; Shiffrin 1999). That said, if the zero line view of procreation has anything going for it, its very existence makes procreative skepticism less plausible, and something similar could be said of the Moorean response to procreative skepticism.

D) The Axiological Response

Perhaps the best response to procreative skepticism is to point to the most valuable features of human lives in all known regions. A version of this strategy is defended by Elizabeth Harman, who responds to Benatar by developing a Millian defense of procreation. According to this defense, once we realize that there are numerous higher quality pleasures in life and few, if any, higher quality pains, we can see that most lives are worth living and we might add quite good (2009, 783). Unfortunately, however, I am not as confident as Harman that pleasures are often of a different 'kind' than pains (Ibid.) or that we could acknowledge the reality of higher quality pleasures without also acknowledging the reality of higher quality pains.[36]

That said, I think Harman's claims invite a similar quantitative response, one that could help to speak on behalf of life's basic goodness across the globe. This response grants that there are many pleasures and many pains in a life. But it adds that the very best goods very typically outweigh the worst things—and we might add, outweigh most of the bad all by themselves, without the aid of many lesser goods.

So what are these goods on which we can place this much weight? Here is one example. When I think about the value of our relationships with other persons—family, friends, partners, and certain communities—I cannot think of anything bad in a typical life that really competes in a quantitative sense. The best candidate is perhaps the loss of a loved one in a premature death or the reality that a bad ending probably awaits most of us. But we

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[36] The only justification we get from Harman for the claim that there are not any higher quality pains looks rather thin. She says: "It seems to me that there are not [any higher quality pains], although a possible case might be: knowing that one's children are suffering horribly" (2009, 783). Now perhaps Harman could, if given the chance, provide additional justification for her claims. But since there are also general problems facing qualitative hedonism, I think we should look elsewhere for a response to the worry. I recently saw that Benatar makes a similar point against Harman (2013, 145).

rarely reason that a death is so tragic that we would rather have never known the person who died, and it is hard to attribute this to simple biases. Similarly, although most of us probably face a lot of suffering toward the end of our lives, we doubt that this will pull our lives into the negative range of wellbeing, not least because of the value of our relationships with others. In fact, for many people, the value of their relationships with others is what makes their end of life suffering tolerable. As Christopher Hitchens wrote before his death, "My chief consolation in this year of living dyingly has been the presence of friends."[37]

This last argument about the value of our relationships seems far more promising to me than the previous objections. To be decisive, however, it would require a more sustained defense than I can give it here. One reason concerns the fragility of our relationships. Even if we can get past the worry that all of our relationships are unraveling, given the reality of our deaths, we still must acknowledge that some of our best relationships are likely to go bad long before our deaths. Even so, for myself, the value of our relationships with other people has a lot of weight and remains extremely important in justifying procreation; it is largely what keeps me from siding with the anti-natalist and what leads me to celebrate the birth of a child.

Despite this last claim, though, I must admit that much more work will need to be done if we are to fully justify optimism and global forms of pro-natalism. Indeed, it is precisely because the above skeptical worries cannot yet be fully ruled out that we have good reason to reject Fred Feldman's contention that happiness research lacks any interesting philosophical implications (2008b, 25).[38] This research may well have very interesting philosophical implications. They just aren't going to be as radical or as straightforward as Benatar thinks.

9. Conclusion

To sum things up, I have sought to do three things in this paper. First, I offered a systematic challenge to Benatar's highly pessimistic views about life and procreation, arguing that global pessimism here is unnecessarily strong. Second, I showed that even if Benatar's strong views can be set aside, serious, overlooked, local problems remain, particularly if we take key findings in happiness research seriously. Third, I sought to soften the

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37 http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2011/12/In-Memoriam-Christopher-Hitchens-1949 2011, Accessed 2 March 2014.

38 My impression from correspondence with Fred Feldman is that happiness research lacks philosophical significance because it doesn't tell us which theory of wellbeing or happiness is correct. But I think that this standard of significance is too restrictive. If this research could help to show that many of us do not fare well given various views of wellbeing or happiness that would be highly significant.

force of this skeptical challenge in various ways, but was only partially successful. The result is that substantive local procreative skepticism remains a live possibility, at least for now.[39]

This is not to say that I am a radical local procreative skeptic—one can hold that some position x is a serious possibility without affirming x. Nor is my claim that we should go around telling prospective parents about their biases in an attempt to prevent them from creating. I am interested in whether there are objective problems for procreation and how far-reaching these problems might be. Whatever we do with this information is a distinct question. Perhaps, until we know more about the relevant science and philosophy, the best thing is to keep non-specialists ignorant and inculpable. Or perhaps the mere risk that the dilemma developed above is true generates an overriding duty not to procreate and generates a corresponding duty to inform prospective parents of the risk. But this would require a further argument and it is not one I wish to make here.[40]

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39 I say "at least for now" since it is my hope that the challenges raised here can be answered in future work. As is generally the case, however, answering the skeptic requires knowing where the problems lie.

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