Nothing Personal:

On the Limits of the Impersonal Temperament in Ethics

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1

Nietzsche began his early philosophical career under the sway of Schopenhauer's pessimism. He enthusiastically endorsed Schopenhauer's description of even the best human life as a "struggle which in its deepest and innermost nature leads to resignation."[1] This is because, the young Nietzsche said, we can almost never overcome our "disgust at the valuelessness of [our] existence". And these insights, he claimed, humanity owed to Schopenhauer. A few years passed, and the more mature Nietzsche had an epiphany:

> Schopenhauer, pessimism notwithstanding, *actually* – played the flute . . . every day, after dinner. You can read it in his biography. And just out of curiosity: a pessimist who negates both God and world but *stops* before morality, – who affirms morality and plays his flute, affirms a *harm no one* morality: excuse me? is this really – a pessimist?[2]

Here, Nietzsche is playfully aghast at the performative irony of a pessimist who plays a cheery instrument every evening, and who, in addition, spent a great deal of energy arguing for compassion as the essence of morality. Elsewhere, Nietzsche argues that Schopenhauer desperately needed his "enemies" (principally Hegel), his anger, and his antipathy towards sensuality in order to stay "cheerful".[3] A genuinely committed pessimist, he realized, would simply

wither away into nothingness, and not passionately take up aesthetic, polemic and moral-philosophical projects. Life, insofar as it is life at all, does not *actually* despair at suffering and struggle. Life *needs* limitations to push against, difficult goals to pursue, values to affirm. A person cannot escape this imperative by merely declaring, in some intellectual mood, that they are a pessimist about life's value. This 'pessimist' will reveal their carefully concealed cheerful, life-affirming spirit as soon as they start to try to accomplish something.

2

In a recent paper, I offered a meta-ethical critique of David Benatar's anti-natalism.[1] Since the present essay will build on the argument given there, I will summarize the general points here before proceeding to a discussion of Benatar's more recent work on meaningfulness.

Any moral philosopher who issues edicts or directives faces a simple question: what *practical reasons* do agents have in favor of the directives you are assigning to them? Or, put another way, what is your account of practical reason which generates or underwrites these reasons for action, reasons for which actual agents can act? In addition, even if agents do have some reasons to perform the action you say they ought to perform, there is a subsidiary question: why do those reasons necessarily outweigh the reasons they may have to act in a contrary manner?

Some moral philosophers take these questions very seriously. Christine Korsgaard is an excellent example. In arguing that I ought to follow Kant's Categorical Imperative, Korsgaard tries to show that *qua* agent I am already committed to it, and that therefore I already possess the requisite motivating reasons to obey it. Moreover, when I have motivating reasons to break the

[1] Smyth, 2020, "What is the Question to Which Anti-Natalism is the Answer?"

moral law, it retains its rational supremacy in virtue of my inescapable drive to *be an agent*, or to make free choices.[4]

Early utilitarian theory also concerned itself with these questions. In arguing that each of us is subject to internal and external sanctions when we fail to maximize happiness, John Stuart Mill was arguing that we each have powerful motivating reasons to be good utilitarians.[5] Much modern moral theorizing, however, is not always so clear on the question of rational authority. This might seem like accidental oversight, one that that merely needs correcting in certain bodies of literature. However, in some cases, the absence of this question from certain literature is no accident: theorists do not account for rational authority because their normative assumptions effectively preclude their doing so.

Nowhere, I claim, is this phenomenon more evident than in much contemporary procreative ethics, where questions of major practical importance are often simply *identified* with the question of how agents can maximize overall value, impersonally construed. That is, the question "which actions should I take?" is illicitly conflated with the question "which impersonally optimal possible world should I make actual?" But unless an extremely ambitious conception of practical reason is true, these are not even close to the same question. Inasmuch as any applied-ethical project wants to actually speak to individuals, it needs an account of practical reason which connects impersonal facts about the badness or goodness of possible worlds or states of affairs to the practical reasoning of real, situated human agents. Otherwise, it is a wheel spinning in the void. Or, as I put it in the paper, it is applied ethics which cannot be applied.

This, then, was the key claim: that Benatar shares, with many other theorists in procreative ethics, this strange silence on questions of rational authority. For example, in giving the conclusion of his famous "asymmetry argument" against bringing people into existence, Benatar insists that

"it is better *for a person* that he never exist, on condition that we understand that locution as a shorthand for a more complex idea."[6] He makes this claim in order to avoid the charge that his argument merely ranks possible worlds and does not speak to the well-being of the person who is brought into existence[7]. Prospective parents care about the well being of their future child and obviously have practical reasons to avoid harming them. But in elucidating this "more complex idea", Benatar is forced right back into the language of possible worlds and of comparisons between them:

> One way in which we can judge which of these possible worlds is better, is with reference to the interests of the person who exists in one (and only one) of these two possible worlds. Obviously those interests only exist in the possible world in which the person exists, but this does not preclude our making judgments about the value of an alternative possible world, and doing so with reference to the interests of the person in the possible world in which he does exist.[8]

It is very important to see that the comparison involved in the asymmetry argument is a comparison between the values of two possible worlds. It does not matter that the comparison is "with reference to" some item that only exists in one of the two worlds. For example, it is true that *ceteris paribus* the world containing the red ball is *more red* than the world without it, and this is a comparison that is made "with reference to" the redness of the existing ball. But it is not true that the *existing ball* is more red than it is in the first world: the phrase "more red" here applies to worlds and not to objects within the worlds. Similarly, according to Benatar himself, the evaluative predicate "better" is being applied to worlds and not to persons in those worlds or to their lives. It is not better *for me* to have never existed, it is just (allegedly) a better world in which I do not exist.

Benatar must therefore assume that prospective parents have significant motivating practical reasons to prioritize world-ranking when deciding whether to have a child. This, to put it mildly, is not an assumption that anyone should take for granted.

Next, when giving his 'misanthropic argument' against human existence, Benatar claims that since human beings *cause* so much suffering, we have a presumptive duty to stop making them.[9] And he clarifies that the argument concerns overall aggregate suffering, and not, say, the average amount of suffering caused by any individual.[10] Yet, again, there is no attempt to say why facts about overall aggregate suffering caused by a *type* (human) ought to weigh in the practical reasoning of parents who are considering the creation of a single *token* human being. The insignificance of this prospective being's contribution to the pool of suffering doesn't seem to bother Benatar, and this is because he is operating within a perspective which assumes, without argument, that individual decision-makers ought to be guided by a broadly rule-consequentialist principle: do what would reduce overall suffering *if* others also followed your example. But it is by no means obvious – indeed, two centuries worth of criticism show that it is highly non-obvious – that prospective biological parents ought to make this their guiding practical principle.

Finally, in giving his badness of life argument against procreation, Benatar does at least give a practical consideration that will surely resonate with prospective parents: don't create a being that will have an on-balance disvaluable life. However, in coming to the conclusion that our lives are bad, he assumes that coming to have a positive feeling about one's life does not constitutively improve one's life. That is, when a sick or a poor person cheers up about their sickness or poverty, this is just a bias, perhaps selected-for in evolution, a response that is just failing to track *the facts* about well being. Facts which are wholly constituted by such objectively

measurable things as sickness and poverty. But why can't the cheering up *constitute* an improvement in one's condition, such that it cannot really count as a bias? In a recent reply to Christine Overall, Benatar grudgingly concedes something like this point, but immediately clarifies that for him, the relation between positive judgments or cheering up and quality of life can only be contingent and causal, characterized by a "feedback loop" that might get started by an initial optimistic judgment.[11] Subjective assessments of life's quality are thereby kept conceptually separate from life's actual quality.[12] But this, I argued, is exactly what you would expect from a moral philosophy which does not try to connect itself to the subjective practical reasoning of deciding agents, who, after all, have only their allegedly "biased" subjective perspectives to go on when deciding whether life is really bad.

Or anyway, so I argued. In this paper, I want to take a step back. I will attempt to explain, via the invocation of Jamesian philosophical *temperaments*, why some moral philosophers are tempted to think and write as Benatar does, in near-total abstraction from questions of rational authority.[13] I will argue that in striving to occupy a wholly *impersonal* moral-philosophical perspective, Benatar is led to ignore more *personal* questions, such as "what reasons do I have to do as the moral philosopher instructs me to do?"

The explanation will doubtless appear to some, at times, like an extended exercise in the *ad hominem* fallacy, confusing philosophy and psychology. But I am quite sure that it is no fallacy, just as I am sure that the distinction between real philosophy and what some will call mere psychology is entirely illusory. This is because my diagnosis will contain a critical edge: Benatar, I claim, is less reflective than he needs to be about the ways in which the impersonal perspective may be incoherent and self-deceived, particularly when it operates in moral philosophy.

3

First, I should try to explain what I take a philosophical temperament to be. I will do so by using an example from another area of philosophical inquiry. Derek Parfit famously argued that there is no such thing as a persisting self that endures from moment to moment. Reflecting on this account in *Reasons and Persons*, he enthused:

> Is the truth depressing? Some may find it so. But I find it liberating, and consoling. When I believed [in the enduring self], I seemed imprisoned in myself. My life seemed like a glass tunnel, through which I was moving faster every year, and at the end of which there was darkness. When I changed my view, the walls of my glass tunnel disappeared. I now live in the open air.[14]

As Parfit rightly noted, however, some will certainly find the thought depressing. I am one of those people. To learn that this life is a long project carried out by no-one, by a contingently intertwined series of psychological events and not a person, seemed, to me at least, devastating. For example, I am supposed to think, on my wedding day, that there will, in five years, be no *deep* distinction between my having married Erica today and some other numerically distinct individual having married Erica today. This seemed completely destructive to the preconditions of agency as I experience it. But I don't think that this is a sense that I could have moved Parfit to share. He was, I conjecture, simply a different kind of person, one who had no trouble with such thoughts. "I hope," he could have earnestly said on his wedding day, "that those two different future-people are very happy together, and fundamentally this hope is no different than hoping that any two strangers should be happy together." Personally, I could not agree to marry someone while

sincerely thinking this thought. But I must recognize, as I think Parfit did, that this is all about temperament.

Philosophical temperament is not moral character or anything that ought to be the subject of moral approval or disapproval. Rather, as William James stressed, in conducting philosophical inquiry, there are certain kinds of conclusions that each of us finds intellectually *satisfying*. This is not because they follow, logically, from indubitable premises. Rather, something about the idea strikes us as simply intuitive or important. This experience is a kind of emotional-aesthetic affirmation of the idea in question. It simply makes sense to us in a gently pleasant way, cohering neatly with our experience or with nagging feelings we have always had but never consciously articulated. Parfit's liberatory experience was, I suggest, a very deep and moving version of this kind of affirmation, an expression of his philosophical temperament.

This, I wish to stress, is no debunking argument. Such an argument would quickly self-refute, as this paper is no less influenced by temperament than Parfit's work was. It is merely an explanation for why some of us seem troubled by certain ideas while others remain cheerfully unbothered. It can also, in some cases, serve as the basis for an "agree to disagree" peace treaty among warring philosophical camps. If the arguments on each side are cogent and coherent, and if all that divides the warring camps is the presence or absence of an emotional-aesthetic affirmation, then the two sides can (perhaps) agree that they have gone as far as they can. In other cases, though, symmetry will not obtain. If I discover that my temperament is leading me to say things that are contradictory, or that it is rendering me unable to answer crucially important questions in my chosen field, I can try to become consciously aware of its operation and try to suppress or moderate its extremes. Therapeutic exercises of this sort may be the only hope for convergence in philosophy.

4

Before proceeding to describe the *impersonal* temperament in moral philosophy, however, a brief personal interlude. As a newly minted parent myself, I have become even more disappointed in philosophers writing on procreative ethics who ignore the question of rational authority. In refusing to say what particular, personal reasons *I* may or may not have to procreate, and in preferring to remain fixated on the value of various impersonal states of affairs or on abstract permissibility, much of this literature does a certain violence to parenthood as it is actually experienced by parents. This is because it misses the rational force of various experiences and life-changes which can be profoundly meaningful and important for biological procreators. Thus, in my view, the scholarly conversation about childbearing must engage in a deep way with the personal considerations which can and do motivate procreation. To name just a few such under-theorized considerations:

- The extreme difficulty of pregnancy can easily lead to the forging of new bonds of care between the pregnant woman and her partner.
- The extreme difficulties of childbirth, an absolutely singular experience in any human life, can forge even more intense bonds of care, not only between parents, but amongst immediate family.
- In witnessing and enacting the birth of a new human being, there can be profound lessons about the nature of a human life, particularly concerning its initial frailty. This leads many to a deeper appreciation of the sacrifices and efforts made by one's own biological parents.

- Instead of remaining almost entirely alienated from the animal kingdom, as many people in modern industrial societies are, pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding can connect people in interesting (if somewhat hard to describe) ways to their fellow members in class *mammalia* and indeed to the natural world as such.
- Family and community often respond, in extraordinary ways, to the needs of a couple with an entirely new baby. Understanding that the childbearing mother is in need of a great deal of rest and that the new baby places extraordinary demands on the couple, people sometimes reach out in surprising and heartwarming ways.

This final consideration is particularly strong in many non-Western societies, where community members demonstrably show far more concern for parents with a newborn. Moreover, in such communities a new child tends to create new bonds of care and concern between large, extended families.[15] One interesting question, to which I cannot devote any attention here, concerns the extent to which the meaningfulness of childbearing is obscured from the view of comparatively privileged academics writing in communities dominated by the atomistic nuclear family ideal, communities whose economies require high levels of mobility from adults and which therefore produce the routine disruption of extended families and social networks.

This aside, any reader familiar with the literature on the ethics of procreation will agree, I hope, that it is fairly rare to encounter any sustained discussion of the practical considerations listed above.[16] There are some exceptions, but the general tendency is to canvass 'personal' reasons in order to determine which of them is morally acceptable or permissible. Some theorists, like Benatar, often remain fixated on deciding which type of action is "right" or "best" in some impersonal sense, on which procreative choices will contribute to society or reduce climate emissions or contribute to the tax base or whatever. That is, they write as if the prospective parent

ought to be fundamentally concerned to justify their actions before the court of impartial morality. Which perhaps they should be, but what is the *argument* that they should be? That is the blind spot, and as one reflects on the myriad of personal reasons for having children, this blind spot appears more and more absurdly large.

In saying all of this, I of course do not mean to cast aspersions on the decision to adopt or to deny the enormous and unique value in adopting a child.[17] Nor do I think there is any point at all in comparing the two options, as though there were some all-purpose, non-contextual answer to the question of which is *really* more valuable or admirable. The point is that biological procreation does have *some* unique features which can render it particularly meaningful, for the right persons. For such people, there are therefore many unique practical reasons in favor of procreation. Reasons that simply just don't feature in any approach which seeks to (for example) derive the wrongness of childbearing from the aggregate suffering caused by human beings, or from a metaphysical asymmetry that generates a world-ranking, or from the insistence that we are all too "biased" to see that our lives are terrible.

5

What leads Benatar to this strange place? Here, the notion of a philosophical temperament will be helpful. Drawing on the influential work of Thomas Nagel, I'll define two moral-philosophical temperaments:

> In deploying normative-ethical concepts – such as *value*, *duty* or *practical reason* – the **impersonal** temperament is only satisfied with *agent-neutral* conceptions, that is, conceptions that make no reference to contingent and subjective features of agents.
>
> The **personal** temperament only finds satisfaction in conceptions of these concepts which are *agent-relative*, that is, which make ineliminable reference to contingent and subjective features of particular human agents.[18]

I use the term "contingent" not in the strict metaphysical sense, but in the sense that such elements can vary from agent to agent. Moreover, the term "satisfied" here is meant to refer to the kind of intellectual pleasure outlined earlier. This sort of pleasure pushes philosophers towards (and away from) various views. What some experience as pleasurably intuitive, others see as frustratingly absurd. As the example of Parfit and personal identity shows, what some experience as a plain *reductio*, others experience as bold, exciting or liberatory.

Now, I think it is reasonably clear that Benatar's work in ethics is largely an expression of the impersonal temperament. We have already canvassed several pieces of evidence. Most notable is his conviction that coming to feel better about your life does not constitutively improve the quality of your life, rather, unless it is tracking some more objective shift towards a better existence or initiating some fortunate feedback loop, it represents an optimistic or "pollyannaish" bias. Moreover, concepts like *duty* often receive a purely consequentialist and agent-neutral gloss; in giving the misanthropic argument, he writes that "we have a (presumptive) duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering and death."[19] Rather than speak of, say, duties *to* friends, family, or to the projects that one happens to care about, Benatar is more inclined to speak of duties to pull the

causal levers that will produce the most value or prevent the most disvalue, agent-neutrally speaking.

At this point, I shall simply trust that the reader has the general idea. I have not introduced any critical elements to the analysis; thus far, all we have is some psychology. I now turn to a discussion of Benatar's more recent work on meaningfulness. Here, we shall see, the impersonal temperament is out in full force, and it is also where the cracks in the temperament begin to show. Once we see these cracks for what they are, we will be in a better position to see what is ultimately wrong with Benatar's case for anti-natalism.

6

In *The Human Predicament*, Benatar aims to defend, among other things, the conclusion that "a deep pessimism about the meaning of life is entirely appropriate".[20] He takes care to insist that human lives are not *meaningless* in all senses. But he insists that the most important kind of meaning we strive for is unavailable to us. This, we will see, is "cosmic" meaningfulness, or meaning from the perspective of the cosmos.

To begin, Benatar follows Robert Nozick in claiming that meaningfulness is "about transcending limits. A meaningful life is one that transcends one's own limits and significantly impacts others or serves purposes beyond oneself."[21] Unfortunately, this imprecise characterization does not receive much by way of clarification. Many questions arise: what are "one's own limits"? I cannot bench-press 200 pounds. But with great practice, I could (well, okay, maybe 150 pounds). Does my present inability count as a "limit" in the relevant sense? Or are my "limits" things that I could not do no matter how I tried? We can immediately see that this second

conception of limits would not work, since it would trivially imply that all lives are meaningless in all senses. After all, to coin a phrase, one can never do what one can never do. I conclude that by "limits", Benatar must mean barriers to my action that I can overcome with effort or with personal transformation, even if those efforts or transformations are extraordinary or fantastical.

So perhaps becoming a better weightlifter will add meaning to my life, on this conception. But there is a second condition: my activity must "significantly impact others or serve purposes beyond [myself]." So that's probably weightlifting out, then, unless my intention is to use my newfound strength to either "impact others" or "serve purposes beyond myself". Such conditions, we may assume, are meant to rule out merely self-interested actions that have no effect on others, such as binge-watching TV or picking flowers to put in a scrapbook.

Of course, some alert readers will notice that watching entertaining programming or picking flowers to put in a scrapbook seem like they could easily bestow meaning on an afternoon. If they have, they are probably at least friendly to the personal temperament in ethics, one which would conceptualize the normative concept "meaning" in at least partly agent-relative terms. But Benatar, ever the impersonal ethicist, unsurprisingly rejects this concept of meaningfulness:

> According to such accounts, which I shall call "subjectivist," actual meaning reduces to perceived meaning. This leads to bizarre results… it seems odd to think that lives devoted to watching soap operas, counting hairs on people's heads, or – if still-more-outlandish examples are required – collecting used condoms or tampons would be meaningful even if they were felt to be meaningful by the persons who lived them.[22]

Of course, the contrary, purely impersonal account of meaning leads to equally bizarre conclusions, for example, the view implies that a person who is made suicidally miserable by their limit-transcending pursuit of some objectively valuable end is living an ideally meaningful life.

This stock quibbling aside, Benatar concludes that we should "stick to the distinction between (a) a life feeling meaningful and (b) a life actually being meaningful."[23] This, note, is precisely the same distinction he made when discussing life's alleged badness. Normative concepts are rarely defined subjectively in Benatar's work, and this, recall, is the defining characteristic of the impersonal temperament in ethics. Counter-examples concerning soap operas and hair-counting simply *feel* particularly problematic to such a temperament, and they produce a particularly deep dissatisfaction with subjective theories.

Benatar goes on to make another sweeping claim about meaning: that it in fact comes in many varieties, depending on the perspective from which a life is judged to have meaning. Such perspectives are said to vary in terms of their *expansiveness.* Here, it may be helpful to reproduce the diagram Benatar provides in order to illustrate this idea:

		Perspectives:	Meaning (lessness):
More expansive	Cosmic meaning	Universe	*sub specie aeternitatis*
	Terrestrial meaning	Humanity	*sub specie humanitatis*
		Human groupings of various sizes (e.g., nations, tribes, communities, families)	*sub specie communitatis*
More limited		Individuals	*sub specie hominis*

Figure 1: Benatar's Illustration

It is this first, cosmic form of meaning that our lives are said to lack. Now, is this use of the term "limited" meant to refer to the same concept as the aforementioned idea of personal "limits", the one contained in his basic definition of meaningfulness? It is hard to say, and this is another unclarity that haunts Benatar's discussion. We might try to get a start on this interpretive question by thinking about what could make the cosmic perspective more "expansive" than the others, other than the fact that the entire cosmos is bigger than human individuals or groups. Yet, this exercise turns out to be next to impossible, because Benatar simply does not say what this mysterious cosmic perspective actually is. Here, first, is his attempt to flesh out the idea of a *perspective*:

> We must avoid taking the term "perspective" too literally. For example, the universe does not literally have a perspective. Nor does humanity as a whole have a perspective in the way in which you or I might have one… Thus, when we speak about the perspectives of the universe, humanity, communities, or individuals, we

> are speaking in a metaphorical sense. The real question is whether life has some purpose, impact, or significance at the relevant level.[24]

Even leaving aside the fact that unexplained metaphors are extremely unhelpful here, this description just re-poses the interpretive question: what *is* the cosmic perspective (or, indeed, any other perspective), if it is not actually a perspective? What does "significance *at the relevant level*" mean, especially when applied to the cosmos? Benatar's most complete attempt at an answer comes when he says:

> the suggestion is not that this "perspective of the universe" be taken literally. It should no more be taken literally than the phrase "a God's eye view" need be taken literally. Atheists can speak of a God's eye view without implying the existence of God. They are speaking about the perspective that God would have if he existed. The cosmic perspective is the view of the cosmos even if nobody actually has that view in its entirety.[25]

I am quite sure that on reflection, Benatar himself would admit that things have become extremely unclear here. The illustrative analogy simply makes no sense. God is definitionally an agent with a perspective. So this atheist can simply generalize from what he or she knows of agents and ask what a maximally impressive agent would think. He or she will almost certainly be *wrong* – a problem that will also haunt our alleged access to the perspective of the cosmos – but they can at least ask the question. Yet, the cosmos is not and cannot be an agent. There is no "that view" for the cosmos to even potentially have "in its entirety". To this disanalogy we may add another: the cosmos actually does exist. Thus, taken in its most straightforward sense, Benatar's analogy instructs us to access the cosmic perspective by asking what the cosmos would think if it actually existed. But it does exist. The problem is that it doesn't think thoughts.

I suggest that we are beginning to glimpse the problem with the impersonal temperament: often, it seems to strive for something it cannot even articulate, some ineffable form of transcendent value or metaphysical union with Being. Nozick was certainly such a philosopher; his reflections on value and meaning were suffused with cosmic metaphor and exceedingly abstract metaphysical speculation about the nature of "the limitless".[26] Benatar appears to be following Nozick very closely here, trying to secure impossible approval from "the cosmos". Yet, to those who do not feel this lack, an impersonal temperament has nothing to say, other than to repeat vague metaphors. In other words, *it is an anti-subjectivism which ends up in a profoundly subjective place*.

Benatar concludes that human life is positively meaningless from the cosmic perspective. We still don't quite know what this means. But perhaps we can get some purchase on what he is after by looking at the reasons he gives for this judgment. If life is cosmically meaningless because it is X, it stands to reason that cosmic meaning would follow from the negation of X in a life. Here are the candidates that I am able to discover in the text:

1. **Spatial limits**: "While we collectively can have some effect on our planet, we have no significant impact on the broader universe. Nothing we do on earth has any effect beyond it." (36) "If the universe consisted of you and you alone, you would not be limited in this way." (56)
2. **Temporal limits**: "We exist now, but we will not exist for long." (36) "…there is a temporal limit that [we] cannot transcend. Those lives would not be infinitely absurd if they lasted an eternity." (55)…
3. **Absence of teleology**: "The evolution of life, including human life, is a product of blind forces and serves no apparent purpose." (36) "We serve no purpose in the cosmos." (63)

These, I take it, are the three principal contributory conditions for the cosmic meaninglessness of human life. Inverting them, we might conclude that ideal cosmic meaningfulness can only be lived out by an immortal being who is either constitutive of all reality or who has the power to affect all reality, a being whose every attribute is intelligibly produced by teleological forces which guarantee their objective value and purposiveness.

Does this being sound familiar to you? It certainly sounds familiar to me. While Benatar spends some time rebutting the idea that God's existence would give our limited lives meaning, it is possible that the only kind of being who can live a life of "cosmic significance" is God, or something that very nearly resembles God as he is traditionally conceived in monotheistic religion.

Benatar actually tries to avoid this conclusion, by noting that of course the idea of God *worrying* about his own cosmic significance is absurd. This is because, he notes, "The whole project of transcendence makes sense only if one is limited."[27] So, perhaps God's life would *not* be cosmically meaningful, because transcendence is impossible for an unlimited being. This is an odd conclusion; one would have thought that if the cosmos could be impressed with anyone, it would be impressed with God. But unfortunately, since limits are necessary for meaningfulness, it turns out that this isn't the case. So I must ask again: what *is* a life of cosmic meaning?

Benatar doesn't give us any examples. But here is a guess. Suppose you, tomorrow, developed the capacity to make every sentient being in the universe twice as happy as they previously were. This certainly *seems* like the rather dramatic transcendence of a limit, and one that would "serve some purpose in the cosmos", in the sense that every being who could *appreciate* your beneficence would certainly do so. And then, in order to continue the limit-transcendence project, you would need to become more powerful each day, supplying more goodness or

happiness to the lives of creatures throughout the universe. This type of being seems to meet the criteria.

Yet, again, I have a hard time distinguishing this capacity from the capacities that gods are traditionally said to have. If this line of thought is right, Benatar thinks that our lives are pervasively tragic because we are not as unimaginably powerful and good as a demi-god who becomes more godlike every day.

Of course, once we see what the supposed tragedy actually is here, it begins (to many of us) to look much less obviously tragic. There must surely be some kind of argument for the claim that this is *actually* tragic. But there is not, and there cannot be: one simply either *has* or *does not have* the all-too-subjective sense that one's life is missing this kind of thing. Where does this sense come from?

I know of no better answer than that given by Nietzsche, whose famous proclamation "God is dead" is actually followed by an important qualifier:

> God is dead, but given the ways of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.[28]

In my view, Benatar's "cosmic significance" is one of those shadows. Approval from the cosmos is exactly what you would expect a modern Western person to desire if she were left yearning for the sort of thing her deeply religious ancestors used to experience, in a culture which has not yet learned to live without the Christian God as a central part of its shared narrative. I am not saying this in order to offer some smug debunking argument: there is nothing intrinsically wrong with one's normative instincts being shaped by one's socio-cultural position. Rather, it is vitally important to see that contingent and wholly subjective factors are giving rise to substantive

normative commitments, and that this calls the coherence of the impersonal temperament into question, since that temperament has elsewhere tried to exclude those very factors from consideration. Benatar offers no evidence for his assertion that suffering related to our failure to become godlike is "indisputably a part of the human predicament", and not just part of the predicament of certain culturally located humans of a certain temperament.[29]

8

Benatar concludes:

> Neither our species nor individual members of it matter *sub specie aeternitatis*. Whatever other kinds of meaning our lives might have, the absence of this meaning is deeply disturbing to many… this is an unfortunate condition for beings that yearn for the confidence that their lives are cosmically meaningful.[30]

These declarations are meant, crucially, to tell us why this "cosmic meaninglessness" is actually tragic. Cosmic meaninglessness is bad news because it frustrates a desire many of us are said to have, the *yearning* for cosmic meaning, the desire to be godlike. But why, we should ask, does Benatar care to relate this conclusion to what we desire? I submit that this is because he knows, as every moral philosopher knows, that at a certain point the question "why should I care about this conclusion of yours?" will arise. That is, this conclusion must, at some point, relate to the actual concerns of at least some human beings, or it will appear unimportant.

Here, we meet with the fundamental problem facing a purely impersonal temperament in ethics. For this temperament, the mere fact that we *do* desire something is supposed to be of no intrinsic normative significance. After all, some people desire to count hairs on heads and some

desire to collect used condoms or tampons, but this desire-satisfaction wasn't supposed to be relevant to the meaningfulness of their lives. Or, I can, in a fit of iconoclasm, imagine that the oak tree across the street has a perspective and despair that my life is "meaningless *sub specie oak tree*". This does not, for the impersonal philosopher, at all imply that my life has suddenly become worse or less meaningful, simply because something I happen to want is beyond my grasp.

So cosmic significance can't just be something that we want, it must be something we ought to want, or this is no "bad news" at all. What could possibly show that we *ought* to want to be demi-gods? I know of no argument here, especially because the desire to be nearly limitless and all-important in some godly sense does not at all seem like an ideally healthy or well-adjusted desire to have.

This is the critical edge that comes along with my relentless psychologizing. The lack of sustained engagement with questions of rational authority in Benatar is no accident. This is because the impersonal perspective in ethics *cannot* have an account of its own rational authority, of its right to command our practical attention. When the impersonal philosopher attempts this feat, they must at some point simply express contingent, subjective, agent-relative elements, such as the idiosyncratic desire for cosmic meaning. Yet, unlike a purely personal philosophical temperament, which might content itself with self-legislation, in seeking to *legislate to all*, the impersonal perspective lapses into unhelpful silence about why others ought to take the desires and impressions of its host as authoritative.

And now, at long last, we have the connection to the anti-natalist arguments: the idea that prospective parents ought to prioritize world-ranking in their practical reasoning is just such a subjective impression, one which Benatar surely has, and which he has every right to apply to his own decisions. But in legislating to all prospective procreators, he takes on a nearly impossible

burden: he must show that such an unusual conception of practical reason is in fact rationally mandatory. This would give the impersonal temperament some authority to legislate to all. But such a task is positively Herculean, and this explains the silence on this fundamental question.

9

As you have probably guessed, I tend towards the personal temperament in ethics, and not accidentally I decline to issue all-purpose deontic edicts about procreation. I think that there are many reasons for and against having children. Some have to do with the child's well-being and their place in an uncertain world, some have to do with the parent's search for meaning in an otherwise fragmented or incomplete existence. Many more kinds of reasons will weigh, some quite heavily, depending on the agent or agents in question. But my position carries no special burden concerning rational authority. Since I do not presume to know what all agents have most reason to do in all contexts, I need not explain why anyone has reason to take *me* seriously. This is a characteristic strength of the personal approach in ethics, and its only task is to creatively and attentively elucidate the practical reasons we may have with respect to procreation. This is not to say that the personal perspective can't fall into its own excesses; this is why it has often been said that an existentialist *morality* is impossible, since a model of practical life which has each individual arbitrarily choosing what to be at any given moment is badly in need of some interpersonal constraints if it is to count as a moral system at all. Yet, the point is that an approach to ethics which allows that agent-relative elements provide us with at least some of our most important practical reasons has a comparatively easy time answering questions about rational authority.

By contrast, like his position on meaning, Benatar's perspective on childbearing legislates to all of us: he believes that it is always wrong to biologically procreate, full stop. Under the standard assumption that "wrong" refers to decisions we have decisive reasons to avoid, the anti-natalist is committed to there *always* being decisive reasons to avoid procreation, for all agents. This creates an enormous dialectical burden. In favor of this extraordinary conclusion, Benatar's anti-natalist arguments cite purely impersonal, agent-neutral considerations, such as the aggregate suffering human beings cause, or an impersonal world-ranking based on a metaphysical asymmetry. But if arguments like this are to work, they must presume an account of practical reason according to which we always have overriding reasons to reduce badness in the world (or select the impersonally optimal possible world, which amounts to roughly the same thing). This would be an account which is subject to a powerful array of well-known objections. Is it really true that I am *rationally required*, right now, to donate one of my kidneys to the nearest person in need, given that I can function just fine with one kidney?[31]

Of course, Benatar might wiggle out here by denying the moral-rationalist assumption that we always have overriding reasons to obey morality.[32] But this would render the anti-natalist position far less practically interesting, since any prospective parent could simply say that for this deeply personal kind of decision, an impersonal moral system is not a particularly strong source of reasons. "If that's morality," they might say, "then I guess I'll just be a morally bad yet nonetheless rational person who strives to live a life of profound joy, struggle and meaningfulness with her family." Since I am not under the impression that this is what prospective parents are meant to say in reply to anti-natalist arguments, I think that Benatar must be committed to moral rationalism, and therefore to what looks like an exceedingly implausible account of practical reason.

10

"We are unknown to ourselves, we scholars," writes Nietzsche, meaning to insist that scholarly types are particularly lacking in self-knowledge and prone to self-deception.[33] There is a road back from the extremes of the purely impersonal temperament, and it involves the kind of self-understanding that Nietzsche is after. For Nietzsche, the scholar Schopenhauer might have been cured of his pessimism if he had stopped to look more carefully within himself, at the drives and motives that structured his own activity. There, he would have encountered aesthetic and philosophical drives which do not shrink before suffering or resistance, but which positively seek such things out and relish the challenges they provide. This, in turn, might have led to a revaluation of suffering, and the fly might have finally escaped the pessimistic bottle.

Similarly, there is no better cure for the excesses of the impersonal temperament than a return to one's own life. Self-examination will reveal that our agency is deeply structured by projects, cares and narratively structured commitments. We moral philosophers should recognize that our interminable scribbling and our argumentative clashes reflect a set of passions and drives that are deeply particular, subjective, contingent, and no less practically significant for being so. The contributors to this special issue, for example, must surely appreciate that the time and effort spent on these internecine debates might be hard to justify before the court of impartial morality. Indeed, I'd wager that a large chunk of humanity, upon being informed about our scholastic squabbles over the wrongness of procreation, would shake their heads and say, "gee, you might as well count the hairs on people's heads or collect used condoms."

Yet, this subjective impression of *theirs* has no bearing whatsoever on the meaningfulness of *our* academic projects, because no person is required to run their projects past some kind of impartial approval committee in order to live a genuinely meaningful life. And if we are among those who have no desire to have children, we should recognize that the drive to reproduce is, for many people, the same sort of thing, a key part of *their* meaningful life.

Each of us operates in the world under this tacit sense of who we are and of who we want to be, and moral philosophy must make contact with this sense if it is to be anything other than a wheel spinning in the void. This recognition of what is essentially in ourselves and in others, should, in turn, lead us to firmly reject the purely impersonal temperament in ethics, and to keep a suspicious eye out for arguments which merely express that temperament.

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator* (New York: Good Press, 1874/2021), p. 1.
[2] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future.* (London: Penguin Books, 1886/1990), section 186.
[3] Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1885/1967), bk. III, section 7.
[4] Christine M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[5][5] John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism.* (New York: Hackett, 1863/1997), ch 3.
[6] David Benatar, "Still better never to have been: a reply to (more of) my critics," *The Journal of Ethics* 17 (2013): 121-151, p. 124.
[7] Jeff McMahan, "Asymmetries in the morality of causing people to exist". in David Wasserman, ed., *Harming Future Persons* (London: Springer, 2009), 49-68.
[8] Ibid., 125.
[9] David Benatar and David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation: Is it Wrong to Reproduce?* (London: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 35.
[10] Ibid., p. 51.
[11] David Benatar, "Suicide: A qualified defence", in James Stacey Taylor, ed., *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Death: New Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 235.
[12] Ibid., p. 236.
[13] William James, *Pragmatism* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1907/1975).
[14] Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 281.
[15] Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001); Meredith F Small, *Kids: How Biology and Culture Shape the Way We Raise Young Children.* (New York: Random House, 2002).
[16] Tina Rulli, "Preferring a genetically-related child," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 13, (2016); Travis N Rieder, "Procreation, adoption and the contours of obligation," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 32, (2015): 301-302; Rivka Weinberg, *The Risk of a Lifetime: How, When, and Why Procreation May Be Permissible* (London: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 2.

[17] Tina Rulli, "The unique value of adoption", in Carolyn McLeod, ed., *Family-Making: Contemporary Ethical Challenges*. (London: Oxford University Press, 2014).
[18] On agent-relativity and agent-neutrality, see Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); David McNaughton and Piers Rawling, "Value and Agent-Relative Reasons," *Utilitas* 7 (1995): 31-47. This distinction in temperaments is very close to what Nagel called the 'objective' and 'subjective' perspectives in philosophy, see Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
[19] Benatar and Wasserman, op. cit., p. 79.
[20] David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 16.
[21] Ibid., p. 18; Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 594.
[22] Benatar, op. cit., p. 25.
[23] Ibid., p. 26.
[24] Ibid., p. 23.
[25] Ibid., p. 36.
[26] Nozick, op. cit., pp. 436, 601-604.
[27] Benatar, op. cit., p. 55.
[28] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (New York: Vintage, 2010), section 108.
[29] Benatar, op. cit., p. 63.
[30] Ibid., p. 40.
[31] John Arthur, "World Hunger and moral obligation : The case against Singer", in Steven M. Cahn, ed., *Exploring Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology* (London: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[32] For an excellent summary of the dilemma facing the consequentialist moral rationalist, see Douglas W. Portmore, *Commonsense Consequentialism: Wherein Morality Meets Rationality* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[33] Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, op. cit., section 1.