

# Life is Good

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David Benatar has made a number of distinct claims leading to the conclusion that giving birth to people harms them, that it is overall impermissible to do so from a moral point of view, and that hence, giving birth needs to be strongly discouraged (Benatar 2006). In the response to his work, his exciting direct antinatalist arguments, primarily those concerning the asymmetries (such as his claim that being born is always a harm but not being born is never a harm), have taken center stage. The issue whether life is all that bad or is in fact good has been relatively neglected. I will take up this matter, and argue that there is a strong case to be made for the goodness of life, in a way that significantly affects the plausibility of Benatar's views.

Benatar himself sees the "goodness of life" issue as a central component of his position. Even if one grants the asymmetry arguments, *how* bad bringing people into existence would be depends on how bad life would be. Even more importantly, the badness of actual lives carries significant independent argumentative weight. According to Benatar, "If people realized just how bad their lives were, they might grant that their coming into existence was a harm even if they deny that coming into existence would have been a harm had their lives contained but the smallest amount of harm" (Benatar 2006: 60). Moreover, since the asymmetry arguments are controversial, and confront strong pronatalist arguments and intuitions, it matters a great deal for the way we will evaluate Benatar's position whether indeed "the best lives are very bad, and therefore that being brought into existence is always a considerable harm" (Benatar 2006: 61).

I will assume here familiarity with Benatar's position, and not take care to note the places where I agree with him. I will also not go in detail into the implications of my claims for Benatar's arguments, except for his claims against the view that life is good. Finally, I will consider the badness and goodness of life as composing one topic, as I think Benatar views this as well.

The goodness (or badness) of life is a matter of degree. I do not think that there is any one conclusive or decisive argument to be made either way on this topic of how good life is, yet I do think that there is a strong case for rejecting Benatar's overwhelmingly negative view, a case which can be constructed cumulatively, based upon a number of diverse considerations. Sketching some of these will be my aim here.

## 1. Happiness:

One way in which we can try to understand whether life is good is to ask the living: this is frequently done, and there is a large research literature that reports and compares people's replies on these issues, primarily couched in terms of happiness (for a general survey of the subjective well-being literature, see Diener 1999). In modern Western societies, consistently large numbers of people (over 80%) report fairly high

to very high levels of happiness. One set of studies found that a full ninety-three per cent of Americans report feeling very happy, pretty happy, or moderately happy (see Liszka 2005: 326). This means that all those people would be more or less perplexed by Benatar's views, not quite knowing what to make of them. For them, at least, life *is* happy, well-being prevalent, satisfaction wide-spread; in short, life is experienced as good, or at least quite good.

This is supported by the fact that nearly everyone views the premature termination of lives, both their own and others', as a huge loss. Would this not imply, then, that they view the continuation of life as something at least quite good? That the great majority of people would view the painless cessation of their life as a terrible disaster and loss seems to me to show that people almost universally view living as being good fortune.

It is not easy to claim that nevertheless people are not really happy; indeed it may not be clear what this means. Happiness seems akin to pain here: genuine first-personal reports of pain have strong evidential weight, which are very difficult to dismiss, and analogous considerations seem to apply to happiness. Benatar does not deny that people report that their lives are good, and this makes it very difficult to claim that they experience their lives as being bad. At least insofar as we focus on happiness or well-being, it is not quite clear what Benatar means by saying that life is not good. If we think of this in the usual, experiential way, then life *does* seem quite good for most people. This generates a doubt whether Benatar is in fact relating to what most people mean when they think of the goodness of life (in terms of happiness or well-being), but then this threatens to considerably weaken the significance of his claim that life is not good, suggesting that perhaps he sees the "good life" eccentrically.

The fairly robust research results are significant in another way: divergences in happiness tend to make good sense. Societies that report higher levels of happiness are by and large the societies where we would expect this to be so, namely, advanced Western societies where economic existence is relatively secure, and where there is more personal security and freedom. These are the same societies into which many people want to immigrate, in order to improve their lives, for themselves and their children. Thus, "respondents in very poor nations such as India and Nigeria reported much lower SWB [subjective well-being] than people in wealthier nations even though poverty there has been endured for centuries" (Diener 1999: 286). Indeed, "the relation between wealth of a nation and average SWB is positive and strong. Gross National Product (GNP) per capita correlates approximately .50 with life satisfaction across 39 nations... wealthy nations appear *much happier* than poor ones" (Diener 1999: 288). It is important that on the social level things are broadly reasonable here (I will consider later some issues of individual personal divergence in levels of happiness). Human beings are often fickle on such matters, happiness is notoriously tied to expectations, and there is an important distinction between what people actually experience and the way they will later perceive those events, just to point out three complications, and yet one sees that happiness is very often higher when we would expect it to be, and lower where there are good reasons for this. This not only supports the significance of the results of this research, but *explains* much of the prevailing unhappiness, on the broad social level. If we see that people find life bad when they are destitute or persecuted, this does not show that life as such is bad, or even that it is very likely to be bad but, on the contrary, it suggests that life is found good *unless there are good reasons to be unhappy about one's state, reasons such as great poverty or persecution*.

Since people consistently report levels of well-being that contrast with Benatar's claims about the badness of living, he needs to discredit these results. I will consider this matter below, but already one can see that discrediting common sentiments will not be easy.

The fact that the happiness results significantly track happiness-making features strengthens the qualitative credentials of the "pro-goodness" claim. On the broad social level people tend to be happy unless desperate or harmed, and this seems to indicate that possessing the baseline of a satisfactory life is quite common, and will typically result in a *reasonable* sense that life is by and large happy and well worth living, together with rational backing for those instances where people do not feel in this way. People's sense of well-being seems to be reasons-responsive in a way that lends credence to their reports.

## 2. Taking suicide seriously:

Suicide is a great embarrassment for Benatar's claims: people simply kill themselves in very low numbers. Indeed, they typically cling to life even when life objectively seems to be very hard and even hopeless. This *prima facie* supports the "pro-goodness" of life case, suggesting that there is, for most people, a great deal of good in their lives, which therefore seem worthwhile to preserve, even in the face of pain and loss of hope. Benatar has responded by providing an "error theory": roughly, people do not kill themselves because they are biologically built this way, the biased "psychological phenomena are unsurprising from an evolutionary perspective. They militate against suicide and in favor of reproduction" (Benatar 2006: 69). And it makes sense why human beings would develop in this way, for those biological creatures that would more easily commit suicide would procreate less, hence gradually ceding evolutionary control to those disposed to hang on, irrespective of the goodness of life. This is a powerful move. Yet I think that there are fairly decisive points that can be made against it, points which at least considerably weaken Benatar's counter-move.

It is important to look at the populations in which suicide is more prevalent. One category is that of the young, where suicide is the fourth-ranked cause of death for young males, and the third for young females, worldwide (Wasserman 2005). Much suicide seems to follow from the temporary instability of hormonal-affected youth, coupled with a less developed ability to take things in their stride and put them in perspective (as well as irrationality – in a surprising number of cases, the irreversibility of suicide does not seem to be grasped). Even with youth much suicide is explicable as an (over)reaction to specific harms or disappointments (abusive or over-demanding parents, bad grades, being left by one's boy-or-girlfriend), factors which in themselves do little to speak about the badness of life as such, rather than the badness of abusive parents and the like; and more broadly, these facts attest to the dangers latent in over sensitivity at a young, immature and vulnerable age to difficulties and disappointments.

That these matters do not mean much about life *as such* is suggested by the reality whereby many failed suicides live on to look back at the act with horror, seeing it as a sign of their youthful folly rather than as something that was actually reasonable or justified by the experience of living.

A second large category of people who commit suicide is that of the terminally ill, decrepit or elderly. These are frequently people for whom it *makes sense* to wish to cease living, because in their personal lives there is something specific that is bad,

such as the approaching prospect of a painful death. Many such people also feel that they have had a long and good life, and that “enough is enough”, while the rest of their lives could not measure up to the quality of the earlier periods: all sentiments that, again, support the idea that life is, often, good, and indeed that – under half decent social conditions, in reasonably good health and without severe mental problems – the baseline of life is good.

When we go deeper, we indeed see that most people who kill themselves in fact do so because of the *absence* of something: life is good unless crippled by severe ill-health, or by the prospect of decline into dementia and lack of control towards the end of their life, for example. And so, to summarize this point, that so few people kill themselves, and that those who do, do so either during stages of immaturity or when they have good reasons to do so (particular reasons not shared by most people during most of their lives), does not support Benatar’s claims. Moreover, suicide due to the absence of the good aspects of life goes some way to *support* the goodness of life, showing how life is typically full of good things, while usually it is only the *absence* of such goodness which leads (relatively few) people to take their lives. *If suicide is typically a response to the absence of something good that usually prevails among the common features of life, then this suggests that life tends to be good.*

In itself, the importance of some things in order for people to have a sense that living is worthwhile implies a vulnerability to loss, and therefore opens the door for badness. But when we note the relative rarity of suicide, and see that much of it follows from the absence of things which, for most people, exist and suffice to make life reasonably good, we see that any general claims about the badness of life become quite weak.

### **3. Suicide and not being born:**

Benatar reasonably seeks to distinguish wanting not to have been born from wanting to kill oneself. I myself have sought to do so in one context (Smilansky 2007b), when trying to show Bernard Williams’s mistake in thinking that if one thinks one’s life is worth living then one cannot wish not to have been born. Yet the two are close enough to be worrisome for the idea that life is bad. After all, one indeed does not control whether one was born, but one does almost always control whether one continues living: if life is so bad, the badness can be stopped. So the relative rarity of suicide *prima facie* indicates that most people are happy enough living, and do not wish to not have been born. Indeed, it does not seem unreasonable to infer that most people thereby affirm that it was fine for their parents to have brought them into existence. There can hardly be a very big problem with having been born if so few people take up the obvious solution to this problem.

Another way of thinking about this concerns risk. If one produces children, then in a sense they come to exist at the mercy of fortune. Yet typically people in economically advanced countries can do a great deal to make it probable that their children will live a good life, and thereby to limit the risks. But alongside this probability there is also the knowledge that if things really work out terribly, there is, almost always, a way out. Death is bad, but some things are worse than death, and in case the gamble of life fails, death too is an option. So taking the risk of generating life seems reasonable, when coupled with the existence of a possible exit strategy. The existence of this option is not painless, yet it limits the moral problem of bringing people into the world, and puts into relief the significance of the relative rarity of taking it.

Of course matters are more complicated. It will not do to reply that, after being alive, people find life gripping and so it is emotionally “too late” for them to end up with the result of not existing. If they find life so gripping, this supports the “pro-goodness” case rather than the evils of having been born. The attachment to others is a stronger point here. Some people indeed find little joy in living, but do not kill themselves because this would greatly sadden their close relatives or friends. Yet even here we must take care: if personal attachments and concern for others prove *so* meaningful and powerful in preventing suicide, then either this adds fuel to the “life is good” stance (since there are things worth living for), or the badness of life which pushes against the force of such concern and towards suicide is not that strong; it is difficult to deny both claims.

Moreover, if this issue would be general and prevail beyond relatively few individuals, then we could expect mass suicides of the closely interconnected: if all members of some circle would see themselves as *victimized by their very existence*, what stops them from liberating themselves from this predicament? Killing themselves *together* will then not leave any of them alone, without their relatives, saddened by the loss. Yet this sort of action – and even the thought of it as a live option, as far as we can tell – seems to be so rare as to be negligible. Nor does Benatar himself seem to recommend it.<sup>1</sup> Some individuals indeed refrain from killing themselves only for the sake of others, but this (a) shows the strength of some of the good things in life (love, friendship and care for close others), (b) is unusual (and not shared by those relatives and friends who do not themselves wish to kill themselves as well), and (c) often happens, as we saw, when there is some *particular* strong, but unusual, reason for doing so.

It also seems significant that there is so little expression of the wish not to have been born, or at least this is so with most people who live under objectively tolerable conditions. If life were so bad, then – even if we bracket the possibility of suicide – we could expect much more expression of the Job-like wish not to have been born, in common sentiments, literature and the like. The idea is culturally available. Yet the sentiment is hardly to be found, except with those who are by temperament unusually melancholy, or are in depression, or, like Job, have some good reason for feeling so.

#### 4. The benefits of apparent badness:

Mature people often view hardships and difficulties in their past as challenges that helped them to grow and to make more of their lives: while it would be silly to claim that all bad features of lives turn out to be useful and “worth it”, we should also not fall into the opposite trap of seeing every difficulty as a blot upon life. In extreme but not rare cases we might even want to speak of “Fortunate Misfortune” (Smilansky 2007a). Much of what makes life good builds upon what may seem as purely negative. While being denied immediate success may be disappointing, it often builds character, allows for the development of talent, pushes us to improve our performance and become better, and enhances satisfaction and self-respect when things work out. We may fantasize on having our magical wishes supplied by some Genie, but in normal life we are better off without it. This means that many things that look as bad features of life are not so, from a broader perspective, and likewise that many of the frustrations and complaints of life also need not be taken at face value. We saw above that there are

<sup>1</sup> The claim that on Benatar’s view of the badness of life he should call for suicide and not merely for non-procreation has been forcefully made by Elizabeth Harman (2009). I find this line convincing, but have tried to develop other arguments here.

surprising indications that most people are quite happy; it is instructive to note that even when they are not, this may often just be short-sighted.

More broadly, the unhappy are often misperceiving good actual features of their surroundings and condition, missing out on much of the good that is there, passing over cues that the less pessimistic or melancholy are able to catch.<sup>2</sup> Other people do care about them, opportunities are open, and pursuing some goal will prove to be personally worthwhile if done wholeheartedly; life, in short, is good, yet this is not recognized. Likewise, given events or circumstances may be interpreted in different ways, and often it is only if a negative interpretation is chosen that matters will seem grim or unrewarding. So again, it is often not so much that life is bad, but that certain people filter out the goodness.

### 5. Illusion:

Benatar also deploys the counter-claim that, even when people say that they are happy, most of this is but an illusion, a product of irrational bias: “In fact, however, there is very good reason to doubt that these self-assessments are a reliable indicator of a life’s quality” (Benatar 2006: 64). Here I think two replies can be made. The first is to cast some doubt over the claim for the extreme prevalence or importance of illusion, as a factor pertinent to our topic. There is admittedly plenty of evidence in social psychology that people over-estimate their abilities, and often hope unreasonably. Unfounded beliefs and superstitions also play a substantial role. Moreover, many people respond to adversity by adaptation, “moving the goal posts” of their aspiration. Benatar does a good job of pointing all this out. So with all this undeniably going on, I will not have a simple, decisive reply. Yet it seems to me that much of what we saw above supports the view that illusion is not, in fact, the dominant factor here. The prevalence of suicide by the irrational (e.g., unstable young people) puts into relief the norm, whereby most people do not do so. And the suicides rather than the rest of us are often those for whom a case of living under illusion would more plausibly be made: love is blind, and love sometimes leads people to kill themselves, while regular life and more calm relationships are less deluded, and only rarely lead people to suicide.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, the consistent correlation between good personal and social conditions and reports of well-being, e.g., the difference in reported happiness between people in poorer and wealthier countries, indicates that reality matters here a great deal. People tend to be happier when they have good reasons to be so and less happy when they have good reasons to be less happy, and for all its helpfulness, the important role of illusion does not undermine the thought that people can be sensible concerning the goodness and badness of their lives. Recent research in fact seems to have scaled back the sanguine perception among past researchers of the ability of people who have been severely harmed (spinal-cord accident victims or people with multiple or chronic problems) to quickly return to their previously high levels of happiness (Diener 1999: 287).

Moreover, even the (indubitable) role played by illusion should not obviously play into the “anti-goodness” side. Insofar as life tends to be quite good (at least for the mentally stable and moderately healthy, living in well-ordered societies with decent

2 The thought that we are not seeing some good features of life, and the effort to uncover them, has been one of the concerns in my philosophical work; see for example Smilansky (1997) and Smilansky (2012).

3 I cannot be accused of being insensitive to the importance of the role of illusion in our lives; see for example Smilansky (2000) and Smilansky (2004).

living conditions) then illusion is much less needed. But where it is needed more urgently, it comes more into play. That seems to me like a good mechanism, which helps life to be as good as it is.

It is too easy to dismiss the positive role of illusion as a factor that actually does make life better. Consider the “Pollyanna Principle” noted by Benatar (2006: 64-69), where people tend towards optimism. Frequently, this *actually makes life better*, for those under its influence. In other words, to the extent that we live in our hopes and dreams, we live well, even if – indeed, because – we are too optimistic. Benatar focuses on this as a way of undermining prevailing human estimates of their well-being, without sufficiently recognizing how the very mechanisms of illusion in fact make life better, overall, for most people.

Similarly for memories of the past: Benatar makes much of studies that consistently indicate that people remember good aspects of their past lives over bad ones (Benatar 2006: 65). But surely this is *good*, if we seek to understand the quality of life: our memories of the past are, after all, important for our present and future well-being! Illusion can be positive: optimism, for example, can be self-fulfilling, leading to a better reality through inducing greater efforts that result in success, which then justifies the initial optimism. There is a large body of research showing that illusion and self-deception are frequently helpful for people (see for example Goleman 1985; Taylor 1989, Taylor and Brown 1994).

Perhaps we are biologically determined to some extent to deceive ourselves about our happiness. But perhaps things go deeper, and we are biologically determined to do as much as we can with difficulty and misfortune, not let them get us down or even turn them to good use. Or perhaps even most of us are simply biologically determined to be quite happy, much of the time, to experience life as good. And even when maintaining the level of happiness requires self-deception, that as well may just be a way for life to be good.

## 6. Value:

So far I have focused, like Benatar, upon happiness. But another and highly significant way in which life can be good concerns value. The very features emphasized by Benatar as making people biased and therefore unreasonably satisfied with their lives arguably push in the direction of making the whole issue of happiness less important (see Liszka 2005). In any case, even where people are not very happy, they can be filled with a sense of the *significance* of their lives, whereby they respect, appreciate and enhance value. Freud famously eschewed painkilling medication at the end of his life in order to be able to think clearly and further his valuable life-project. Many and perhaps most people see room both for happiness and for values (moral goodness, knowledge, beauty, respect), which are not necessarily understood in terms of experiential well-being. Admittedly this may be a source of disappointment, for some people who are otherwise happy may become despondent because they come to have doubts about the meaning of their lives (Benatar 2006: 82ff). Yet this does not in fact seem to make life not worth living for most people. In a way it seems that there are two distinct (if related) paths to the good life – happiness and value (cf. Wolf 1997). I may find great pleasure in watching my favorite team triumph in a football match, but not think that there is any value in the experience; I am just having a good time. On another occasion I may see value in doing things – helping students think more clearly, or helping injured or ill relatives – which in themselves I may not enjoy. This allows people

some leeway in living good lives, which will typically combine happiness and value, but could be worth living due to the second, even for those who are deprived of the first.

Albert Camus (1975) famously suggested that the question whether to kill oneself was the most important question a person should confront. Yet in order to confront it, one must already be alive. The potential for existential meaning in one's life is granted only when one has been brought into existence.

It is perhaps especially important in our context to see that value comes forth in procreation. As I have argued elsewhere (Smilansky 1995), continuing the generations may not only make some people happy (say, your parents), but may enhance value in the world. Sometimes there are special circumstances involved. Consider one example: Hitler wanted to eradicate the Jews from the face of the earth, and every Jewish child born is like a finger in his eye, a moral enhancement of value and affirmation that evil has not triumphed. More generally, having children is itself often a contribution in terms of value. One's children might well create value (moral goodness, love, knowledge, beauty), and are very likely to be consumers and appreciators of value. Having children is hence *prima facie* valuable.

### **7. The future:**

The future is shrouded in mystery, yet we can say some things about it, albeit in probabilistic terms rather than with certainty. To the extent that life is bad for reasons inherent to human existence, then it is doubtful how much hope the future holds – although the prospects of genetic modification and the like might hold forth promise even here. But in any case we did not see good reason to feel that life was bad, as distinct from particular lives burdened by individual or social misfortune. If that is indeed the case, then this supports the hope that at least the sources of social misfortune can be overcome, and life may become better in the future. Losing children to disease or hunger, or being persecuted by the secret police serving the dictators who rule over one can indeed make one's life considerably less good, but to the extent that historical tendencies to limit and overcome such evils will prevail, the argument that life is bad will further weaken.

It is instructive that many of the complaints people have over "life" are that life is too short: they want more of what they take to be a good thing. As knowledge and technology progress, the average life span increases, and the goodness of life should increase. That central element of the badness of life which consists of the feeling that there is not enough "living time" should then decrease. There is a question as to what makes death bad. This issue lies beyond my scope, yet note only that at least one of the leading views, according to which the main problem presented by death is its life-depriving aspect (see, e.g., Nagel 1988), does not support Benatar's general view. If the main problem with death is that it deprives the victim of death from more years of living, this suggests that life is good.

Global warming, nuclear escalation and other calamities may prove such optimism wrong, but induction from history supports a modest optimism about the future of humanity, while at the very least showing that there is very little wrong with life as such, that life can be, and often is, good.

### 8. What we should worry about:

So, in Benatarian territory, what *should* we worry about? Not, if I am right, so much about life itself, and – clearly much less than Benatar thinks – about bringing people into this world. But this does not mean that we need not worry about procreative decisions, or about the general situation which procreation produces. The following concerns seem to me to be particularly worth pursuing:

a. Which people are about to be born into more or less hopeless conditions? Singling them out, rather than a general focus on all people who are brought into existence, makes more sense. Difficult questions will need to be asked here, but my point is that in order to do so we need to re-focus away from the general pessimistic Benatarian viewpoint.

b. Anyone who (undeservedly) happens to have a bad life, overall, concerns us, for he or she would have not had it were he or she not born. So there is much to regret in *those* cases, and perhaps even blame accruing to those who brought them into existence. Yet the fact that this badness is not the given lot of humanity opens up possibilities to lower the number of people who will end up as having had bad lives – not through avoiding procreation – and trying to improve the lot of those who have had particularly bad deals in their lives.

c. This brings up the issue of the reasonableness of risk, a topic largely neglected in Benatar's discussion. People take upon themselves considerable physical and emotional risk, in where they live, at what they work, with whom they live, and even with what they do in their leisure time. So the fact that life is full of risk (risk which would not exist were the living not born) does not, in itself, prove much. This issue as well calls for further exploration.

d. Since life is so good for so many, but bad for some, this makes life's goodness as such problematic, as it increases the inequality among people. Inequality is a well-worn topic, yet it receives much of its cosmic sting particularly from the goodness of life.

All these problems are worth discussing further. Yet note that many of them are created not because life is uniformly or even typically bad, but rather because it is often very good. We should all be grateful to David Benatar for forcing us to look more closely at the moral problem of procreation. However, it seems to me that the most philosophically and practically useful ways of doing so might well come out of a more moderate and positive perspective on the goodness of life.<sup>4</sup>

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