What’s So Good about Non-Existence?
An Alternative Explanation of Four Asymmetrical Value Judgments

There are cases where many think it would have been better for some child never to have been born. We can imagine a life characterized exclusively by suffering, never containing even the briefest moment of pleasure. However, most of us think that many lives are not of this sort. Many lives are at least all right: the good moments outweigh the bad, and so it’s not better for those people never to have been born.

David Benatar (2006) offers a compelling and challenging argument against this common view. He endorses anti-natalism, which is the view that there’s always a pro tanto moral reason, grounded in the interests of a potential child, against creating the child because it’s always better for the child never to have been born.¹ Benatar’s strongest case for anti-natalism is that it follows from the best explanation of four common value judgments that are essential to our moral theorizing.

In this paper, I present an alternative, and at least equally good, explanation of these four common value judgments — one that does not entail anti-natalism. In the course of this explanation, I introduce a new type of moral reason that is analogous to an undercutting defeater in epistemology.

¹ As will be mentioned in footnote 6, there is strictly speaking a qualification: if one’s life contains no pains at all, then it’s not a harm to be brought into existence.
I. Four Asymmetrical Value Judgments

Each of the four value judgments cited by Benatar contains an interesting sort of asymmetry, and he thinks that the asymmetrical features of each judgment are best explained by appeal to an asymmetry between facts about what’s good or bad for persons. But before delving into the details of his view, here are the cases he cites in support of it. I won’t argue that these value judgments are correct, but, like Benatar, I think each one is plausible and widely accepted.

Procreative Asymmetry: There is a duty not to bring miserable people into existence, but there is no duty to bring happy people into existence. That is, we have a duty not to create children whose lives would be characterized almost entirely by suffering, but we don’t have a duty to create children whose lives would be characterized almost entirely by happiness. And more than that, this asymmetry in our duties should be explained by a further asymmetry in the pro tanto moral reasons for or against creating children. We have a pro tanto moral reason, grounded in the interests of the child, not to create a miserable child, but we have no pro tanto moral reason, grounded in the interests of the child, to create a happy child. Awareness of this asymmetry goes back at least to Derek Parfit (1986).^2

Deliberative Asymmetry: It’s appropriate to cite the child’s interests as a reason not to have a child, but it’s not appropriate to cite the child’s interests as a reason to

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^2 Not everyone accepts this asymmetry upon reflection, though. See, for instance, Elizabeth Harman (2004).
have a child. I take it that this case need not reduce to a special instance of Procreative Asymmetry. The child’s interests could ground moral reasons, as in Procreative Asymmetry, but they could also ground distinctive non-moral reasons that still could be appropriately cited as a basis not to have a child. For instance, we might think that there are parental reasons, which arise in virtue of being a parent and are generated by facts about the child’s welfare. And we might think that, just as with moral reasons, it’s appropriate to cite the child’s interests as a strong parental reason not to have a child, but it’s not appropriate to cite the child’s interests as a parental reason to have a child. And likewise with any other reasons the would-be parents could cite in their deliberation.

**Regret Asymmetry 1:** We can regret, for the sake of a child whose existence was contingent on our choices, the badness of that person’s life, but we cannot regret, for the sake of the child, that she didn’t exist to experience the goods her life would have contained. Put differently, we cannot regret, for the sake of someone who never existed, her failing to have “a good that this never existent person never experiences” (Benatar 2006, p. 34). The sense of ‘can’ in the text isn’t completely clear, but presumably Benatar means to say that it’s not fitting to feel regret, for the sake of the child who never existed, that the child never had a good life, but it is fitting to feel regret, for the sake of a miserable child, that she existed to be miserable.³

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³ It is, after all, metaphysically possible to have many emotions toward all sorts of bizarre things. Moreover, this interpretation is supported by Benatar's use of 'regrettable' in surrounding passages.
Of course, people who don't procreate might still feel regret fittingly, but this regret is for having missed out on the experiences of childbearing and child-rearing — it's not for the sake of the child who never existed.

**Regret Asymmetry 2:** It’s fitting to feel sad for people in a foreign land whose lives are characterized by suffering, but when we hear about an uninhabited island, it’s not fitting to feel sad for the people who, had they existed, would have had a happy life on this island. More generally, it’s fitting to regret the suffering of those people who exist, but it’s not fitting to regret the absence of happiness for those who, had they existed, would have had the happiness.⁴ In addition, it’s fitting to regret, for the sake of people who exist, that, for each pain, they suffer that pain; but it’s not fitting to regret, for the sake of people who don’t exist, that, for each pleasure they would have enjoyed, they don’t enjoy the pleasure.

**II. Benatar’s Prudential Asymmetry**

On Benatar’s view, each asymmetry is explained in terms of an asymmetry between what make someone’s life go well and what makes someone’s life go poorly. Following Benatar, let’s make the simplifying assumption that pleasure is what makes someone’s life go well, and pain is what makes someone’s life go poorly.

Consider Bill, an individual who exists. The presence of pain is bad for Bill, and

⁴ Benatar shifts between feeling ‘sad for’ and feeling ‘regret,’ so I assume he’s using the terms interchangeably.
the presence of pleasure is good for Bill. Likewise, the absence of pain is good for Bill, and the absence of pleasure is bad for Bill. The asymmetrical feature of Benatar’s view is in its treatment of pleasure and pain in the scenario in which Bill doesn’t exist.

According to Benatar, the absence of pain is good for Bill even in the scenario in which he doesn’t exist, but the absence of pleasure is merely not bad for Bill unless he exists to be deprived of that pleasure (in which case, it’s bad for Bill). 5

Call this view ‘Prudential Asymmetry.’ We can state it in general terms, where ‘X’ stands for any person:

(1) The presence of pain is bad for X.
(2) The presence of pleasure is good for X.

But

(3) The absence of pain is good for X, even if X doesn’t exist to enjoy that good.6
(4) The absence of pleasure is only not bad for X unless X exists to be deprived.

For now, suppose Prudential Asymmetry is correct. This asymmetry yields the following matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario A: X exists</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Presence of pleasure</td>
<td>Good for X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Absence of pleasure</td>
<td>Not bad for X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 See Benatar (2012) for explicit clarification that he has in mind what’s good or bad for a person rather than what’s good or bad impersonally.

6 The locution ‘for X’ might seem odd, especially in (3) because X doesn’t exist. How can a scenario in which X doesn’t exist be good for X? Benatar writes that ‘for X’ is shorthand for ‘judged in terms of X’s interests, whatever they happen to be’ and whoever X happens to be, and that if there is any loose sense in which (3) could be good for X, this is it (p. 31). This isn’t to deny that there is difficulty in making sense of the referent of ‘X’ when X doesn’t actually exist. That said, see Benatar (2012) for some helpful remarks.
(3) is an advantage over (1): what’s good is clearly an advantage over what’s bad. But (2) isn’t an advantage over (4). By ‘not bad’ in (4), Benatar means ‘not worse’ than the present pleasures in A; that is, while the present pleasures in A are better than absent pleasures in A, absent pleasures in B are not worse than the present pleasures in A (p. 41). So non-existence has an advantage over existence, but existence has no advantage over non-existence. This means non-existence is always preferable to existence. Finally, following Joel Feinberg, Benatar accepts an account of harm on which one is harmed by coming into existence when it would have been preferable not

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7 It’s theoretically possible that one’s life contains no pains at all; in that case, non-existence and existence are equally preferable. The main point is that, given any even slight pain within one’s life, non-existence is preferable to existence. And this clearly covers all lives on this planet.
to come into existence (p. 28).  

We’re now in a position to see how Benatar’s Prudential Asymmetry provides a clear, elegant explanation of the four asymmetrical value judgments. Procreative Asymmetry, at bottom, says that while we have a pro tanto moral reason (grounded in the child’s interests) against having a miserable child, we don’t have a pro tanto moral reason (grounded in the child’s interests) to create a happy child. The pains that would be in a potential child’s life generate pro tanto moral reasons against having the child, but because the absence of pleasures is merely not bad for the child in the scenario in which he doesn’t exist, the pleasures that would be in a child’s life do not generate pro tanto moral reasons for having the child. Likewise for any other non-moral reasons that would form a sound deliberative basis in Deliberative Asymmetry: pains that would be within the child’s life generate pro tanto reasons (of whatever sort) against having the child, but pleasures that would be within the child’s life do not generate pro tanto reasons (of whatever sort) for having the child.

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8 Preferable by whose lights? In Feinberg (1994), he invokes a “proxy chooser” for anyone who is too incompetent, due to disability, to express that it’s rationally preferable not to continue existing, where what’s rationally preferable is what’s “required by reason” (pp. 22-23). Presumably, for people who don’t yet exist, we would also want to invoke a sort of proxy chooser to determine whether the child’s life is worth starting. The proxy chooser simply represents the interests of the would-be child. Whatever that child’s interests, it’s rational — based on what’s good for that child — to prefer non-existence over existence, where what’s rational is “required by reason.” It’s unclear whether Benatar would endorse a proxy chooser model, but at least it’s amenable to his view.
For Regret Asymmetry 1 and 2 we need to impose a requirement on the fittingness of feeling regret. It’s fitting for feel regret, for the sake of \( X \), for some event \( E \) only if \( E \) made \( X \) worse off than she would have been had \( E \) not occurred. That is, it’s fitting to feel regret, for \( X \)’s sake, for \( E \) only if \( E \) harmed \( X \). This assumption is plausible on its own, and it enables us to see clearly how Benatar’s Prudential Asymmetry explains each case. For Regret Asymmetry 1, we can fittingly regret, for the sake of a miserable child, that the child was born because having been born was worse for the child than never having existed; but we can’t fittingly regret, for the sake of an unborn happy child, that she was never born because having been born wouldn’t have been better for the child than never having existed.

Exactly analogous reasoning applies to Regret Asymmetry 2: we can see why it’s fitting to regret, for the sake of miserable people on a distant island, that they exist, and we can see why it’s not fitting to regret, for the sake of non-existent people who would have been happy had they existed to live in some uninhabited region, that they don’t exist. What’s more, as Benatar notes, we can see why it’s fitting to regret, for the sake of each miserable person on a distant island, that they experience each individual pain. Yet, for the sake of each non-existent person who would have happily inhabited another area, it’s not fitting to regret that they are deprived of each individual pleasure, because the absence of pleasure, when they don’t exit, is merely not bad for them.
However, if coming into existence is always a harm, it's easy to draw the moral significance of this fact. Other things being equal, the fact that somebody is harmed is a pro tanto moral reason against doing the harmful action (in this case, for the parents).\footnote{One of the things assumed not to hold is a condition that would enable retributivist considerations to kick into effect. If someone has done something morally wrong, it might not be morally bad — it might be morally good, even — that they suffer pain. Throughout this paper, I'll be bracketing these considerations.}

III. Do We Need Prudential Asymmetry?

Suppose we reject Prudential Asymmetry. Instead, we think, the absence of pleasure is \textit{bad} for a person even when she doesn’t exist to be deprived of it, just as the absence of pain is good for a person even when she doesn’t exist. We would then arrive at the following matrix, again using ‘\(X\)’ to stand for any child:

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Call this view ‘Prudential Symmetry.’

Suppose Prudential Symmetry is true. Presumably we would have to look at how much pain and pleasure is in \(X\)’s life, and under what distribution, to get an overall
judgment on whether it was better for $X$ to have been born. This is, I think, the intuitive view: we think that it’s better for us to have existed if the good in our lives outweighs the bad.¹⁰

Benatar acknowledges that this view is logically possible; however, he believes it has severely counterintuitive results.¹¹ Importantly, it appears to deliver the wrong result for the four asymmetries. Let’s focus for now on Procreative Asymmetry. Just as the pains that would be in $X$’s life generate pro tanto moral reasons against creating the child, the pleasures that would be in $X$’s life generate pro tanto moral reasons for creating the child. If the pleasures in $X$’s life outweigh the pains, it will be morally permissible to create $X$, at least in terms of the reasons grounded in $X$’s interests. However, this gets Procreative Asymmetry wrong. We will have then admitted the existence of pro tanto moral reasons for creating a child grounded in the interests of the child— and, worse yet, if the child would be blissfully happy, it’s plausible that we have grounded a moral duty to create the happy child.¹²

¹⁰ This isn’t to deny Benatar’s (2006) plausible point that the threshold at which a life is worth starting is generally higher than the threshold at which life is worth continuing. See pp. 22-28.

¹¹ See footnote 23 on p. 31 of Benatar (2006). Also, my proposal, without the implicit “for $X$’s,” is equivalent to Figure 2.2 on p. 39.

¹² Even worse yet, this moral reason might be stronger than the moral reason for parents to promote their current children’s welfare or to do other moral good.
The problem is that Prudential Symmetry is strong enough to render it morally permissible to create a child, in terms of the child’s interests, but it’s too strong.\(^{13}\) However, I think that there is a way to block the stronger result. It requires that we build an asymmetry into the generation of reasons rather than into the facts about what’s good or bad for a potential child.

When we saw how Prudential Symmetry apparently got Procreative Asymmetry wrong, we assumed that the pleasures that would be in a child’s life generate pro tanto moral reasons for having the child. But we should reject this assumption. Instead, the pleasures that would be within a child’s life generate a different kind of moral reason that’s relevant to the evaluation of the decision to create a child.

What sort of reason? Here, I think we find a useful analogy within epistemology. In epistemology, a defeater is a reason that defeats a reason to believe some proposition P. There are at least two sorts of defeaters: rebutting and undercutting defeaters.\(^{14}\) They each defeat reasons to believe some proposition P but by working in different ways. Rebutting defeaters provide reasons to believe that \(\sim P\), whereas undercutting defeaters undermine one’s reason to belief that P without also being a reason to believe

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\(^{13}\) For simplicity, from this point onward I will drop the qualifier ‘in terms of the child’s interests’ or ‘grounded in the child’s interests.’ Throughout this paper, I will be interested only in that class of reasons. Of course, there might be other reasons — e.g., grounded in the interests of parents who would like a child — that could be relevant.

\(^{14}\) See Bergmann (2006), ch. 6 for a nice overview on defeaters.
that \neg P. To use a simple example, suppose that someone’s testimony gives me a
reason to believe that P. A rebutting defeater would provide independent reason for
believing that \neg P, and I would have to weigh that reason with my reason to believe that
P to determine whether to believe that P. But an undercutting defeater would be, for
instance, reason to doubt the reliability of that person’s testimony. Perhaps I learn of
my testifier’s bias or some other impairment. Importantly, this reason would \textit{undercut}
my reason to believe that P — perhaps with the result that I no longer have any reason to
believe that P — but without generating a reason to believe that \neg P.

The pleasures that would be within a child’s life generate a reason similar
to an undercutting defeater. Instead of generating pro tanto moral reasons for creating a
child, the pleasures generate \textit{undercutting} moral reasons that neutralize pro tanto moral
reasons against creating a child. Likewise, we can understand the strength of each
undercutting moral reason in the same way we understand the strength of a pro tanto
moral reason against creating the child. Each pain that would be within the child’s life
generates a pro tanto moral reason against creating the child \textit{in proportion} with the
intensity of the pain. So, too, with pleasures and undercutting moral reasons: a pleasure
that the child would experience generates an undercutting moral reason in proportion
with the intensity of the pleasure. Assuming that the intensities of pleasures and pains
are comparable, the strength of undercutting and pro tanto moral reasons will be
comparable. For instance, a pain with intensity of -80 hedons would create a pro tanto moral reason against creating the child with strength 80, and a pleasure with intensity of 90 hedons would create an undercutting moral reason with strength 90. Because the strength of the undercutting reason is greater than the strength of the pro tanto moral reason against creating the child, there is no longer, on balance, a pro tanto moral reason against creating the child. Yet, because undercutting moral reasons are not pro tanto moral reasons, there is no moral reason to create the child — just as Procreative Asymmetry says.

For my solution, I’ve introduced a type of reason from the epistemic domain into the practical domain. Just as there are undercutting reasons for belief, there are undercutting moral reasons for action. It’s important to note the similarities between my proposal and Benatar’s. To explain other asymmetries within our value judgments, Benatar introduced an asymmetry in the goodness and badness for someone of the

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15 This account leaves some important questions unanswered. For instance, if parents have the choice of creating one of two possible children, we tend to think the parents should create the child who would be happier. However, to answer this question, I think we need to appeal to another kind of moral reason, not grounded (solely) in the child’s interest.

16 Of course, there are simplifying assumptions in abundance here. As noted earlier, the intensity of pleasures and pains is not all that matters — distribution matters, too. Likewise, we need not assume that the strength of moral reasons is the same as the intensity of the pleasure or pain. It needs only to be a function of the intensity of the pleasure or pain. As before, though, I think nothing crucial hinges on these simplifying assumptions.
presence and absence of pleasure, on the one hand, and the goodness and badness for someone of the presence and absence of pain, on the other. The asymmetry arises when we consider whether the absence of pleasure is bad for someone in the scenario in which she doesn’t exist. Likewise, the asymmetry within my account arises when we consider the kinds of reasons generated by pleasure and pain when someone exists, on the one hand, and the kinds of reasons generated by pleasure and pain when someone doesn’t exist, on the other. Benatar and I both agree that there needs to be a fundamental asymmetry somewhere. I’ve simply placed it somewhere different.¹⁷

IV. Explaining the Four Asymmetrical Value Judgments

We’re now in a position to see how my proposal explains Procreative Asymmetry. There is no pro tanto moral reason to create a happy child because the pleasures that would be within the child’s life generate undercutting, not pro tanto, moral reasons. Likewise, there is no duty to create blissful children because there is no pro tanto moral reason to create even blissful children.

My explanation might seem perilously close to a restatement of the explanandum. It would be if I simply said that there is no pro tanto moral reason to

¹⁷ My proposal is similar to a view discussed in McMahan (2009). However, he thinks that the view is objectionably ad hoc. But I think that my proposal is not ad hoc for the same reason that Benatar thinks that his proposal is not ad hoc: it has explanatory power.
create happy children because there is no pro tanto moral reason to create happy children. However, I’ve offered a substantive view about the kind of reason generated by the pleasures that would be within a child’s life. It follows from this more general view that there is no pro tanto moral reason, on balance, to create a happy child, and likewise no moral duty. My view provides an explanation of Procreative Asymmetry in exactly the same sense that Benatar’s does.

For Deliberative Asymmetry, we need to abstract a bit more. Recall that, if Deliberative Asymmetry is different from Procreative Asymmetry, we need to consider other non-moral reasons that could form a sound deliberative basis. However, once we’ve introduced undercutting reasons to the practical domain, I think there is no reason to restrict their presence to the distinctively moral subdomain of the practical domain. Instead, we should say that the pleasures that a child’s life would contain generate undercutting reasons of whatever sort (e.g., parental) that counteract pro tanto reasons of whatever sort against creating the child. Indeed, I think it’s a virtue of this proposal that it generalizes so neatly to encompass all other sorts of reasons for action. This is to be expected, of course, if we provide a unified explanation of Procreative Asymmetry and Deliberative Asymmetry.

Sadly, things aren’t so straightforward for Regret Asymmetry 1 and 2. However, I think that Benatar fundamentally misdiagnoses these cases. Recall that Benatar’s
explanation of Regret Asymmetry 1 and 2 works via a condition on the fittingness of regret: that it’s fitting to regret, for X’s sake, some event E only if E is a harm. But this highlights the wrong condition of fittingness. Instead, it’s plausible that Regret Asymmetry 1 and 2 support another condition on the fittingness of regret, for X’s sake: it’s fitting to regret, for X’s sake, E only if X actually exists. From this it follows that it’s not fitting to feel regret, for the sake of some non-existent person, that she doesn’t exist to enjoy the pleasures her life would have contained. Moreover, I think this follows from a general plausible condition on the fittingness of any emotion, for X’s sake: it’s fitting to feel some emotion M, for X’s sake, only if X actually exists.

The inclusion of ‘for X’s sake’ in all of these cases is important. In his discussion of Regret Asymmetry 1, Benatar notes that parents might (fittingly) feel regret for not having children, but this regret is plausibly for their own sake: for their having missed the joys of childbearing and child-rearing (pp. 33-34).

Another case from McMahan (2009) supports my view. McMahan writes that, if Benatar’s view is right, it would be fitting to feel relief, for the sake of some non-existent child who would have been miserable had she existed, that she doesn’t exist. But that seems mistaken. One virtue of my proposal is that it can accommodate and explain McMahan’s case, whereas Benatar’s does not.

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18 David DeGrazia (2010) suggests a similar proposal.

19 Fictional characters might seem to pose a special case, but I set those aside for now.
Benatar’s explanations of Regret Asymmetry 1 and 2 have a common structure. There is an emotion — regret — such that it is fitting to have that emotion, for the sake of someone, only when something bad happens to that person. But it’s not fitting to have that emotion (regret), for the sake of a non-existent person, when she doesn’t exist to enjoy the pleasures her life would have contained. Why? Because it’s not bad for that person to be deprived of those pleasures when she doesn’t exist.

But we could construct a similar structure for the relief case. There is some emotion (relief) such that it is fitting to have that emotion, for the sake of someone, only when she avoids something that is bad for her. But it’s not fitting to have that emotion (relief), for the sake of a non-existent person, when she doesn’t exist to enjoy the benefit of having avoided pain. But why? Benatar’s Prudential Asymmetry has nothing to say about this case. It is, after all, good for the person who doesn’t exist to have avoided those pains.

Given the structural similarity between the regret cases and the relief case, Benatar’s inability to explain the relief case is evidence that he has provided the wrong explanation for the regret cases. By contrast, my proposed explanation handles relief and regret cases alike.

If Benatar has provided the wrong explanation of Regret Asymmetry 1 and 2, then the support for either my asymmetry in the generation of reasons or Benatar’s Prudential Asymmetry depends primarily on Procreative Asymmetry and Deliberative
Asymmetry. And on these points, I think the two approaches are roughly on a par.

When two views give an equally good explanation of the same particular cases, it’s fair to look for other cases to adjudicate between the two. Here, however, my view has one clear advantage over Benatar’s — namely, in accommodating the common view that it’s at least sometimes permissible to create children if their pleasures outweigh their pains. Unless we have independent reason to believe that anti-natalism is correct, the fact that it’s intuitively false is some reason to prefer a theory without that consequence to one with that consequence. Providing an adequate explanation of our intuitive value judgments is a holistic enterprise. Benatar’s view was shocking and troubling because it appeared to find a tension between widespread judgments: between the four value judgments conjoined with their best explanation, on the one hand, and the rejection of anti-natalism, on the other. My proposal has shown that there is at minimum no requirement that we accept Benatar’s Prudential Asymmetry, and so no requirement that there be such a clash between our judgments. Conservatism suggests, then, that we prefer the explanation that doesn’t introduce that conflict.\(^2\)\(^0\), \(^2\)\(^1\)

\(^2\)\(^0\) It’s worth noting that I’ve argued against only Benatar’s argument for anti-natalism via his Prudential Asymmetry. Bentar (2006) also offers an argument that we often overestimate the quality of our lives, which go much worse than we think. If all human lives go so badly that the bad outweighs the good, despite our thinking the contrary, anti-natalism would still be true even on my proposal. But I set this argument to the side for this paper.

\(^2\)\(^1\) [ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS REMOVED FOR BLIND REVIEW.]
References:


