

**“I Am Awaited by this Love,
and So My Life Is Good”:
Children and Hope**

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THE FINAL fantasy of the Marquis de Sade was to take hold of the sun and hurl it into the earth. In this paroxysm of annihilation God’s law would finally be lifted from human flesh utterly. It is a curiosity in the history of ideas to see a similar image in a 2007 book by David Benatar. Published by Oxford University Press, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*,¹ is a work of Analytic philosophy aiming to justify a pro-death ethics. Discussing the norms that ought to guide human extinction, Benatar observes that science gives hope that a meteor may strike the earth and finally kill off the entire human population (164–65). Indeed, science, he says, gives us sure hope that human extinction is coming sooner rather than later.

His pro-death platform includes the following theses and items:

- “Bringing people into existence always inflicts serious harm on those people” (184). (Emphasis on the *always*.)
- Abortion is a moral obligation (127)
- Non-procreative sex is the norm of sexuality (127)
- There is no human right to procreation²

¹ D. Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

² Benatar is aware that the European Convention on Human Rights and the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights says otherwise (ibid., 102, fn 8).

- A positive legal right to procreate must be acknowledged. However, this is only a concession to *contingent* privacy issues. Should government secretly administer a contraceptive through drinking water akin to florid today the practical problems of privacy would be overcome (107; 110–11).
- On John Stuart Mill's authority that government ought legally prohibit "paupers from breeding hereditary paupers," sterilization and abortion for "the most harmful reproduction" must be compelled by law. Of course, one would have "to control for possible biases"³ in the selection process of the coerced.

Christians should not dismiss Benatar's book as nonsense worthy only of the *National Enquirer*. The book has pedigree: it is published by Oxford; the readers of the manuscript mentioned in the Preface who proposed the book for publication hold prominent positions in the academy; and the book itself is full of recondite discussions of the best philosophers in the Analytic tradition—the dominant form of philosophy in the Anglo-Saxon world. In one sense, Catholic Christians should also be especially pleased with the book: mainstream philosophy now acknowledges that procreation is a serious philosophical issue. To put it mildly, this was hardly true when *Humanae Vitae* appeared. Analytic philosophy has come a long way since Peter Singer's complete dismissal of sexual ethics in 1979.⁴ Indeed, as Benatar's discussions make clear, there has been a quiet and growing interest in the topic for some time now in Analytic circles.

My essay is built around two questions: Are Benatar's arguments valid? What does this book tell us about the history of ideas in the West?

Benatar does not address any Catholic arguments about procreation but, given his claim that coming to exist is a harm, his pointed question, "Why have children?" is clearly an interesting one to Catholics. The question might seem easy for Catholics to answer, and in a sense this is true, but I wonder about its persuasiveness. The right answer is not a surprise: Catholics hope for children because, as Boethius says, Love rules

³ Ibid., 113. This seems fantastical and ludicrous though the stature of Mill in liberal circles should give us pause. Sir Keith Joseph, one of the intellectual pillars of Thatcherism, lost national credibility in England by suggesting the same (see his Birmingham Speech 1974). Even the conservative Catholic press St. Augustine's Press has published a collection of essays by Vittorio Hösle who advocates enforced sterilization (though not abortion) for environmental reasons. V. Hösle, *Objective Idealism, Ethics, and Politics* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 1998).

⁴ P. Singer, *Practical Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), preface.

the sky. But Benatar's pro-death platform stems from his humanitarianism and it is, I think, undeniable that Catholic ideas about love have lost serious ground to humanitarian ideas about love. There is greater sympathy for Bono than Benedict.

And what about the history of ideas: How did Western thought ever arrive at a closely argued rational demonstration for the morality of extinguishing all human life? Boethius speaks about "the rich and fruitful harvest of Reason" assaulted by "the barren thorns of Passion,"⁵ and Nietzsche uses his literary greatness to praise the fecundity of the will to power,⁶ and yet now an absolute sterility is celebrated by philosophy. There is no doubt that *Humanae Vitae* was keenly attuned to the times. Love, sex, birth, and marriage all suffered radical change in the West in the 1970s.⁷ Attending to these questions, the most consequential documents of Catholic social thought, *Evangelium Vitae* and *Donum Vitae*, for example, show Pope Paul VI's depth of insight.

But *Humanae Vitae* is forty years old. Benatar's themes are more radical, it seems to me, than those discussed in the encyclical. The encyclical is about marriage; it is written from the perspective of married love and about the responsibilities of marriage. There is a host of debates the encyclical still speaks to, especially when one considers the voluminous literature on the family and marriage from within psychology and the industry of fertility medicine. But the philosophical debate is now running far ahead of these sorts of concerns. Benatar does not mention marriage and he might best be said to be most interested in the phenomenon of vulnerability. He does address sexual ethics but not until the fifth chapter and what he has to say is derivative of his earlier argument about human suffering.

Benatar has two basic arguments. One, the less foundational, is a rehash of Schopenhauer: ours is a "world of suffering" (14). Unlike Schopenhauer, Benatar is optimistic. Schopenhauer's famous pessimism is that although one is morally obliged to annihilate oneself the will at the core of reality is eternal, and slips away from you in the moment that you try to annihilate it. You might nought yourself but you cannot nought the will. Its structural alienation renders it eternally fecund, eternally suffering. Benatar is an optimist, however, because he is assured by science that extinction is inevitable: and so, sure in his hope that all human procreation, all suffering, will cease.

This Schopenhauer-like argument relies on a more basic argument deriving from humanitarian sentiment. "I have argued," writes Benatar,

⁵ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 1999), 4.

⁶ F. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁷ D. Frum, *How We Got Here: The 70's* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

“that so long as a life contains even the smallest quantity of bad, coming into existence is a harm” (60). It is a curiosity of Benatar’s book that whilst de Sade longed for the annihilation of the world on account of twisted love Benatar longs for the elimination of worldly sentient life on account of rationality (163). He does not mention love. The topic of procreation certainly does not naturally suggest the theme of love to Benatar. The reason: parents are never loving because given the vulnerability to suffering of every child parents should be aghast at playing “procreational Russian roulette” (92); indeed, as he puts it, playing with a fully loaded gun pointed at the head of one’s child. To give birth is no act of love. On account of vulnerability, no human life is “worth starting” therefore there is no moral duty to procreate (94). Rather is there a duty not to procreate (101). To support these claims, the central argument is: a) suffering is bad and b) stopping all procreation eliminates suffering (ultimately) and c) the undoubted pleasures found amidst the suffering that is human life cannot justify birth.

“Only existers suffer harm,” (29) says Benatar, but surely, the optimist will argue: only existers have pleasure and these pleasures of life must be put in the balance against harm experienced (29–30). His subsidiary, Schopenhauerian argument shows the pleasure-harm balance test does not favor procreation. Yet even if it did somehow, the balance test idea ignores a crucial asymmetry, observes Benatar. The non-existence of pain is a good thing but the absence of pleasure is not a bad thing. Loss of pleasure is only a bad thing if it is a diminishment of human aspiration and comfort but in the absence of people the loss of pleasure is not a diminishment and not a bad thing, therefore (30). It still makes perfect sense, however, to say that a universe without pain is a good thing even if there are no people to enjoy life without pain.

Analytic philosophy is rightly praised for its caution in building arguments. No implications of an argument are warranted until they follow with a cast-iron logic from the premise of the argument. Benatar is oddly lacking here. Christians, for example, do not think that all suffering is bad; indeed, most people do not. All cultures recognize that self-discipline implies unpleasantness of some sort and they do not regard this unpleasantness as a harm. Benatar, unaccountably, from what I can tell, assumes that pain and suffering are harms. By having a child, I harm the child, for the child will suffer. This is not right, though. It is certainly true that I put the child in harm’s way, but do I harm the child? A general puts his troops in harm’s way but it is the enemy that harms them. Benatar runs together the physical reality of pain with the moral phenomenon of harm and seems to think wherever the first is found so is the second. His natu-

ralism is unargued for, he smuggles in the idea of harm, and it is surely false anyway. What Benatar says, seems to me false: "Bringing people into existence always inflicts serious harm on these people" (184). False: because putting someone in harm's way is not the same as inflicting harm upon him or her. There seems to be some odd confusion in Benatar's ideas of agency and causation.⁸

There are at least two other reasons the argument fails, one moral, the other ontological. Is Benatar right about the asymmetry? He thinks a balance test of suffering and pleasure is irrelevant because a loss of suffering is a good and a loss of pleasure is morally indifferent. But what if one is not a scorched-earth utilitarian like Benatar? One might think, as do Smith, Hume, and Scheler, that the realization of high values is a basic moral desideratum. Creating actors able to realize high civilization values, despite suffering, is a conceivable ethics, obviously, and recognizably, animated by the idea of noble life, I would have thought. Benatar thinks the asymmetry idea a knock-down insight, the entire book is built upon it, and yet anyone interested in civilization values is going to argue that the loss of pain is good and the loss of civilization values bad, not morally indifferent. That is, those values themselves matter; and yes, people have suffered for their art! Admittedly, Hume might crack under pressure: he might concede Benatar's point that loss of refinement is a negative only if humans suffer diminishment. Hume's ethics puts a strong emphasis on utility or happiness, but Smith explicitly rejects Hume on this point.⁹ Smith, like Nietzsche, and perhaps Peirce, thinks that beauty is the foundational value and pain filled human effort serves beauty.¹⁰

Catholics will insist that persons can only serve persons. Smith's position is unsatisfactory. But Catholics will join with Smith in resisting Benatar's asymmetry and make the point that the realization of love is worth being born and suffering for. There is nothing odd at all in saying that a universe without love is a diminished universe. To live for love is to live for persons. Generosity is inseparable from the nobility of birth. This is why Pope Benedict XVI, in *Spe Salvi* (§3), cites St. Josephine Bakhita: "I am awaited by this Love. And so my life is good."

It is hope that is Benatar's undoing; it is an unexamined premise assumed in his argument. Benatar hopes for extinction because he is an essentialist about suffering. This hope is based on a misunderstanding about the ontology of children. Benatar thinks that for as long as humans

⁸ "Since all existers suffer harm, procreation always causes harm." Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, 50.

⁹ A. Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1974), 179 and 183.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 181–82.

live there will be suffering. Christians do not believe this, obviously. The world may perish but eternal life is our hope. But Christians believe more. St. Paul speaks of the form of this world passing away. Benatar thinks every child is essentially suffering. To his mind, every birth repeats the past. Here, he has drunk deeply of Schopenhauer's essentialism. But is a child the past? Human nature is, essentially, vulnerable, but not suffering. For every child is *novitas mundi*. Ontologically, it is undeniable, it seems to me, that the world begins anew with every child. Every child is unique. As the medieval Dominican theologian Robert Kilwardby puts it: a person is *res in actu sui generis*. This uniqueness is not a repetition of the past; it is a beginning, a radically new beginning. Every child is the hope of the world made new. Christians have children because they grasp that ontologically a child is what the Incarnation revealed: a refreshing of the world. More, birthing, a wound of love, to use Thomas Aquinas's phrase, is suffering evacuated by love, an act expressive of the ontology of hope that is a child. Every child is an ontological hope, a fresh beginning for the world: the child's vulnerability rightly acted out makes the child, each person, a vessel of mercy (Augustine), refreshment for others. A child is not *essentially* suffering. A child is true history, *novitas mundi*. Each child is the form of the world passing away, vulnerability begun as hope, acted rightly upon, love.¹¹

Perhaps one will simply shrug and say "Benatar's are the views of a lonely radical." This may be true in some sense, but a question persists. Nietzsche was a lonely radical but *The Genealogy of Morals* starts with a celebration of fecundity. What is it about the history of ideas that today a radical might question what even a thinker of audacious originality like Nietzsche took for granted? Unlike Nietzsche, Benatar is a humanitarian; his moral complaint is that we suffer. Nietzsche thrilled to the idea that what does not kill you only makes you stronger. By contrast, Benatar wants to avoid every "unpleasantness." Indeed, his moral complaint is against sentience as such since it means experiencing "unpleasantness" (p. 2). Is his theory logically the end point of humanitarianism? Certainly, since de Lubac's wonderful book *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, a core Catholic thesis is: eliminate God and you eliminate man. The problem humanitarian love poses to Christianity cannot be underestimated. Humanitarian sentiment is so similar to Christianity: both the Christian and the humanitarian long for the end of suffering; action that re-makes the world; that alleviates poverty; that cures; that overcomes prejudice with sympathy. So similar are the aspirations of Christians and humanitarians that many

¹¹ This paragraph owes much to the influence of the American Catholic pragmatist, D. G. Leahy.

Christians are sincerely puzzled if told there is not a straight line from Bono to Benedict. Isn't it true that humanitarians respect human life as much as Catholics? Don't the wealthiest humanitarians spend their fortunes on respecting human life, trying to cure malaria, to ensure fresh water for all?

Why were some of the best modern Catholic thinkers, people like de Lubac, Scheler, Kolnai, so suspicious of humanitarianism? This is an enormous topic, actually, but a part of the answer, and it might seem an odd answer, is: Catholics are suspicious of humanitarianism's hyper-moralism.¹²

As Aurel Kolnai pointed out in the '40s, humanitarianism is hostile to moral hierarchy. Egalitarianism is a preponderant emphasis of humanitarianism and thus moral distinctions must be elided. Certainly, the idea of intrinsic evil, the idea that a certain kind of act can never be moral, is deeply offensive to the social justice sensibility of the humanitarian. It encourages the idea that there might be "intrinsic discrimination between human 'needs,'" as Kolnai puts it. In turn, this suggests judgment and complexity, and so a break on broad policy solutions. Extremely anxious to resolve social problems, social suffering, social justice activists find deference to a variegated moral order intolerable for this reason. Rejecting the idea of intrinsic moral evil might seem an excuse for immoralism, and it is, but its motivation is avidity for the reign of goodness. Benatar's book is a perfect example of this: he is sincere about wanting to end suffering. Noughting the human accomplishes this. Vulnerability (74) is replaced by monism. This explains his obscuring the distinction between the natural and moral orders.

What does monism secure? It delivers the resolution of moral tension. It delivers purity. Strange to say, but an upshot of Benatar's ethics is impeccability. War, hunger, exploitation are all done away with by monism but so also greed, vanity, sloth, egoism, and sexual impurity. Benatar's strange recourse to angelic impeccability is signaled by the alienation of the body that courses through the book. Schopenhauer's brilliant writing skills might furnish Benatar with snappy starts to a few chapters but Schopenhauer is not worthy of being argued with seriously. No arguments are offered as to why Schopenhauer's pessimism is misplaced, or why we are normatively rational, as Benatar thinks, and not willful, as Nietzsche thinks. There is something "obscene" about our planet (89), we are told, and we must be "suspicious" of "human drives" to procreate (96). To observe man's "curious, manifold, and contradictory attributes" is impossible for the humanitarian. For our complex nature suggests something

¹² Paragraphs following owe much to Kolnai's essay, "The Humanitarian versus the Religious Attitude," *The Thomist* 7 (1944): 429–57.

religious: that man is torn between fallness and nobility; that civilization betokens God because human aspiration seeks to recuperate what is sensed as amiss. Indeed, this militancy for angelic impeccability is, as Kolnai pointed out, the core contradiction of humanitarianism: it concludes in “a decisive moral *abandonment* of man.”¹³ N·V

¹³ Ibid., 452.