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Article

Anti-Natalism and the Asymmetry

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Abstract: What should we think about starting good lives? On one view starting such lives is required. On another this is forbidden. There's a third view, occupying a middle position. And according to what Jeff McMahan calls the Asymmetry, starting such lives is permitted but not required. Most of us will incline to this third view, finding the first to be somewhat, the second highly controversial. But I argue that this middle position is untenable, and, further, that the first position is weaker, the second stronger than it initially appears. This isn't, however, to support David Benatar's well-known Anti-Natalist stance. I explain how our versions of this view differ, and show how mine is the one to favour. Of critical importance throughout is an appeal to personhood.

Keywords: Anti-Natalism; the Asymmetry; persons; animals; procreation; desires

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What do we have reason to do, where starting lives is concerned? Lives differ. Some, even if good in part, will be overall bad. Almost everyone thinks we have reason not to start these bad lives. Others, even if bad in part, will be overall good. Here opinions vary. Some think we have reason to start these lives. Others think there is reason neither for nor against starting. Still others think there is reason against.

I'll begin by making clearer the content of and differences between these views – uniformity on bad lives; variety on good lives. And I'll explain why my focus, concerning good lives, is on the second and third of these positions and, though certainly it needs some discussion, to a lesser extent on the first. And then the second position – let's say we're neutral on good lives – connects, as I'll explain, with what we can call the Asymmetry. The third – we're against such lives – more obviously connects with what is known as Anti-Natalism.

Both have their well-known advocates. Jeff McMahan first wrote about what he titled the Asymmetry back in 1981, gave the topic a detailed investigation in 2009 – my focus here – and has returned to it several times since. He appears to think it is both true and deserving of its considerable support. But he finds it difficult to explain its truth. David Benatar appears considerably more confident both about the truth, and about his

arguments for the truth, of Anti-Natalism. And this even though, as he acknowledges, his view is highly controversial.

My aim here is to engage with and assess these views. McMahan is wrong, I'll argue, to suggest the Asymmetry is true. But he's wrong also to think we can do so little to account for its appeal. I agree with Benatar that Anti-Natalism, though hard to believe, is true. But he fails, I claim, to explain its truth. I aim to remedy that here, offering and defending a different account of why it is true. These two aims are linked. Neither author makes much of the person/non-person distinction. So they don't in any detail explore the considerable differences in psychology between fully functioning adults on the one hand, and fetuses, neonates, and also those whose functioning is in certain ways impaired on the other. And they both make too much of the differences between starting lives and saving them. Get these things right, and progress is possible.

I

What is the Asymmetry? It's a combination of a pair of views. Asymmetrists (as I'll call them) appear to think both that there are reasons against starting bad lives and also that there are reasons neither for nor against starting good lives. McMahan gives more detail. He says:

> Most of us accept the following two propositions:
>
> (1) That a person would have a life that is "worth not living" – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause the person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing.
>
> (2) That a person would have a life worth living does not, on its own, provide a moral reason to cause that person to exist, though there is no general moral reason *not* to cause such a person to exist.[1]

What this suggests is that even though there may be useful lessons to be drawn by making comparisons with plants and animals, human lives, lives like ours, will be the focus. And what McMahan soon after this makes clear is that we can, at least for present purposes, assume rough equivalences first, between lives worth living, good lives, happy lives, and second, between lives worth not living, bad, or miserable lives.[2] But other things are less clear.

Do 'most of us' accept (1)? Probably, but even if we think most people will believe this, and even if we think, further, that it is true, there are questions about whether it really captures what McMahan wants to get across. And I suggest it doesn't. To think there is a reason not to start a bad life is compatible with thinking there is a reason also to start such a life, and indeed compatible with thinking this latter reason is the stronger. A religious fundamentalist could think we ought to create lives, regardless of quality. So the claim in (1) needs amending.

We might suspect (2) similarly needs amending. Some of us will think there are lots of reasons to start good lives – to prevent our extinction, to generate future people willing to

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[1] Jeff McMahan, 'Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist' in *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics and the Nonidentity Problem, eds.* Melinda Roberts and David Wasserman (Springer, 2009) p. 49. Broome refers to the view in (2) as *the basic intuition,* but is less well-disposed to it than is McMahan. See John Broome, 'The Value of a Person', in *Ethics out of Economics* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[2] Notice that McMahan chooses 'worth not living' over the surely more familiar 'not worth living'. There's no reason to think he wants to hang anything on this, and no space here to consider whether he should.

work in hospitals and care homes, to complete or balance a family. Others will think there are obviously reasons against – the population needs to be reduced, either for our sake or for the sake of the planet. But McMahan's 'on its own' is intended to take care of this. We are to consider whether there are reasons for starting lives, once these sorts of reasons – reasons concerning those who have an existence, past, present or future, independent of our current concern – are set aside. Such reasons can be powerful. Indeed, they might justify us in starting not only a good life, but also a bad life. But, powerful or not, they sit at the margins of the present discussion. Call them other-regarding or side-effect reasons.[3] So then the claim is that absenting such reasons there are no reasons for, and no reasons against starting good lives. This is the second claim that McMahan thinks most people believe.

It is worth asking here why someone might disagree, and think there are reasons, apart from those that are other-regarding, for starting good lives. And the answer may seem obvious. Some people think it's plainly good for people to have good or happy lives, and that's a reason for starting them. So then, this is what Asymmetrists – against bad lives, but neutral on good lives – want to deny. But we need to work carefully through the moves here. And in doing this we can further distinguish between the three positions I sketched at the outset, and better understand why we might focus on just two of the three.

Someone says it's good for people to have good lives. Is this true? And does it provide a reason to start such lives? The claim may be true, but lack normative force of any kind. It's good for plants to be watered but that, in itself, doesn't give us reason to water them. And it might be argued that this *good for* claim is similarly modest in its implications. But suppose it's granted that people are different here, and that good or happy lives, the ones that it's good for people to have, are in some sense things we have reason to promote. But in which sense? Jan Narveson has famously asked whether we should we make happy people, or make people happy.[4] Either way we add to the sum of happiness. It seems clear there are reasons to increase or add to the happiness of existing people. Perhaps it seems clear also that there are reasons to extend happy lives, and save happy people from the threat of death. In both these ways, then, it seems there are reasons to make people happy. But is there reason also to make happy people, to start new lives, and bring more people into existence? Suppose we think there is reason, and that it's good that happy people come into being. Is it good for their sake, good for them, or is it good for the universe, good *simpliciter,* that this should happen? That stands as a further question, worth pursuing elsewhere.

Right now, and having unpicked some of the complexity here, I want to suggest that we might suppose that this first position – there are reasons to start good or happy lives – is, when well understood, something of a minority view. Once properly distinguished from other and often more plausible views – there can easily be other-regarding reasons to start new lives, there are reasons to extend happy lives, a happy life might be good for someone without our having reason to start it – its appeal will be somewhat diminished.

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[3] One thing, implied already in the examples above, needs to be made clear. 'Other-regarding' means other than the life to be started. A reason for me to start a life is that it will benefit me. That is an other-regarding reason.

[4] Jan Narveson, 'Utilitarianism and New Generations', *Mind* 76 (1967) pp. 62–72.

Look into what it implies, and it will be diminished further.[5] Still, it has takers. And we can call it Pro-Natalism, or the Total View.[6]

So go back now to the second position, and the claim that there are reasons neither for nor against starting good lives. McMahan says this is what most of us believe. But does this really get things right? After all, we're supposed to be against overall bad lives. The bad parts of these lives surely give us reasons against starting them. But then what about the bad parts of overall good lives? Are they simply to be ignored? Consider an alternative. Someone might think there are reasons both for and against starting good lives, but that these in some way or other cancel each other out, such that there is no outweighing reason on either side. Now clearly there might be a handful of cases in which the good and bad parts of some future life will be exactly in balance, with, in such a case, the reasons for and against similarly matched, so that neither carries the day. But then this won't be an overall good life. So then – second alternative – is it that there are more good parts than bad, but the good parts somehow, and for some reason, each count for less? Is something like this what we believe? And is something like this true?

I'll return to this later, and consider then McMahan's discussion of the problem[7], but for now, here is another and simpler way of construing the Asymmetry, one that at least temporarily sidesteps difficulties in articulating the view in terms of reasons, and one that is perhaps more likely to reflect what most or many people believe. We should, I suggest, think that the view has it, again setting aside other-regarding reasons, that starting bad lives is forbidden, while starting good lives is permitted, but not required. *Forbidden* seems closer to the mark than *some reason against* where bad lives are concerned – given there are no side-effect considerations it's just wrong to start these lives – while *permitted but not required* takes no sides in the dispute between no reason, and balanced reasons, and needs no appeal to a distinction between *some* and *a decisive* reason. Is there an objection to this that surely no one can think starting good lives is required? No. The Total View has it that you have reason to do, should do, ought to do that which maximises the sum of human happiness. And hence its name. So then this view, in cases where concerns for existing people are set aside, will have it that we are required, when it is possible, to start good lives.[8]

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[5] I might make two further points regarding reasons. It's not enough to claim that many people will incline to start new lives. If there are reasons there are reasons for (almost) all people, whatever their inclinations. And if there are reasons to do something, there are reasons to pay some price, bear some cost, to do this thing. Combine the points. While many people may think we can legitimately impose costs on this generation for the sake of the next (when their existence is a given) far fewer, I believe, will think we can impose costs on existing people in order to start new people (when they offer no benefits to existing or planned people).

[6] We can call it this without intending to evoke all the details of Parfit's (1984) account. And I should mention here a complication which, though important, has relatively little bearing on the main arguments of this paper. So comment here will suffice. McMahan's claim that most people believe the Asymmetry is provided with no support. Further into the paper he describes what he calls the *Weak Asymmetry.* The position on bad lives is unchanged, but it is claimed now that there are some, but weak, reasons for starting good lives. The claim that most people believe either the Asymmetry or the Weak Asymmetry is, I believe, highly plausible. But the latter represents a version of the Total View. Ought I then to allow that this view is, after all, widely held? I agree with McMahan's claims (66–67) that the Weak Asymmetry has several implausible, and usually overlooked, implications, So I stick with the contention above: only small numbers both properly understand and then support the view that there are reasons for starting good lives.

[7] See McMahan (2009), especially pp. 52–54.

[8] I said that this simpler permitted/required jargon affords temporary benefits. I might note now, in passing, a complication. Required, setting aside existing people, is an over-simplification. The view that you are

The aim here has been modest. I've wanted only to discuss what it is that people believe when they believe the Asymmetry. I've not attempted to say why they believe it, whether they should believe it, or indeed how many believe it. Nor, beyond implicit support for its first component, have I said anything here about whether the Asymmetry is true or false.

II

Anti-natalists are, as the term suggests, in some sense or other against birth, or coming into existence. But there is no need to explore the several ways in which this might be unpacked. For my concern here is with just one species of anti-natalism, that advanced by David Benatar.[9] I'll call this (capitalised) Anti-Natalism. And it is going to be considerably easier, in part because of the discussion above, to say what Benatar, and Anti-Natalists, believe.

Along with almost everyone, they believe, first, and uncontroversially, that starting bad lives is forbidden. And second? Someone might think that all our lives are bad. So then no life should be started. That would be a controversial view. But, even if he sometimes inclines to it, this isn't Benatar's view. He believes there can be overall good lives, but that starting these lives is also forbidden. So starting good lives is neither permitted nor required. The Anti-Natalist's position is then clearly very different from that of the Asymmetrists. Still, they have much in common. For both the focus is on human life, and within that on overall bad lives and overall good lives. And for both the concern is with what, if anything, we have reason to do, where starting lives is concerned, once other-regarding or side-effect considerations are set aside. But what separates them is immense: why believe there's a flat-out ban on starting good lives?

Someone might think that pains matter while pleasures don't. Or even that pain is real while pleasure is some sort of illusion. All our lives in fact contain some measure of pain. So then there is reason against but no reason for starting a life. Similarly, because future pains will be real, but future pleasures won't be, there is reason against but no reason for continuing a life. Or it might be thought just that pains matter more, or are more real. Or simply, because of this, and because predictions are suspect, that we should err on the side of caution. Given that we can never be certain that a life will be good, then it's best that no life is started. But none of this represents Benatar's position. Imagine a life that's perfectly good, except for one measure of pain. He insists we shouldn't start this life. And the measure can be very small. Even 'a single pin prick' or 'only an iota of suffering' is such as to make it better, he claims, that a life isn't started.[10] This, for most of us, is hard to understand, hard to believe.

Yet there's more. Though he's against starting overall good lives, Benatar is nevertheless for continuing them. Ending such lives, lives like most of ours – pleasant,

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required to start good lives, brush your teeth, obey the speed limit or whatever, doesn't mean you should do this whatever the cost, but nor does it mean do it so long as there is no cost. Rather there is some cost you a required to bear. Similar with forbidden. And this prompts a general claim: reasons imply costs. It is, I think, unintelligible to suppose I might have reason to do such and such only so long I can do this at absolutely no cost. Some implications of this will become clearer later.

[9] David Benatar, 'Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34:3 (1997) pp. 345–55; David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

[10] Benatar (2006) pp. 48, 205.

worth living, enjoyable – is forbidden. He is, we might say, anti-natalist without being pro-mortalist; against birth, but not for death.[11]

Though this may now appear a less controversial view, it is at the same time seemingly less consistent, and even harder to explain. Whether a toothache will come at 40 weeks or 40 years either way I have, allegedly, reason not to start your life. Now suppose you are 39, alive and well. Impending toothache surely gives me no reason either to want you dead, or to regret you were ever born. But if I don't think, later, that because of this pain your life shouldn't have been started, why should I think, earlier, that because of this pain your life shouldn't be started?

As with the previous section, all I aim to do here is describe the content of a position. I am not saying, and, other than noting it as controversial, certainly not giving reasons for believing, that it is true or false.

III

Should we make happy people, or make people happy? I said that though we'll mostly agree about the second claim, there'll be considerable dispute about the first. Pro-natalists will insist that we should, while both anti-natalists and Asymmetrists will deny this. But we might consider now a different version of Narveson's question. Should we be concerned to prevent people from being unhappy, or to prevent there being unhappy people? Here there will be widespread agreement. Almost everyone thinks we should have both concerns. Bring this into play alongside a common response to the original question, and we get the Asymmetry: starting bad lives is forbidden, starting good lives is permitted but not required. This, McMahan claims, is 'intuitively compelling, [but] extraordinarily difficult to justify'.[12] The difficulty comes about, it seems, because the pull to symmetrical views is hard to shake off. But, I'll argue, McMahan fails to see his way through all this. Progress can be made, even if solutions are far from entire.

Consider this passage, where McMahan confesses himself stumped by the pull to symmetry:

> It is true, of course, that if one causes a miserable person to exist there will be someone for whom one's act was bad; but it is also true that if one causes a happy person to exist, there will be someone for whom one's act was good. If one does not cause a happy person to exist there will of course be no one for whom that is bad, but it is also true that if one does not cause a miserable person to exist, there will be no one for whom that is good. The cases are exactly alike except that one involves a life worth living while the other involves a life that is not worth living. It is for this reason that asymmetrical views of procreation are difficult to defend.[13]

Are the cases exactly alike? Bad lives are obviously bad, there's obviously reason to end them, and so there's obviously reason to prevent their starting in the first place. Pain is intrinsically bad, and the less of it the better. Almost all of us think this. But then aren't

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[11] *Birth* gives a punchier, even if less precise, contrast with *death* than does *coming into existence.* Similarly with *born* and *died.* Hence their occasional uses.

[12] McMahan (2009) p. 49. Does McMahan think the Asymmetry is true? As I've said, he seems to, but he never makes his position wholly clear. Consider the closing comments: 'It may be that the only view that captures our strongest intuitions about the morality of procreation is the Asymmetry. Yet … the prospects for finding a compelling theoretical defense of the Asymmetry are not promising' (p. 67).

[13] McMahan (2009) pp. 63–64.

good lives obviously good, and, as there's obviously reason to extend them, so there's obviously reason to start them in the first place?[14] Isn't it clear that pleasure is intrinsically good, and the more pleasure the better? Well, not only is much of this less than clear, we can explain the differences. And this will at least help explain the Asymmetry. Let's start by raising a doubt.

Is it really obvious, as I've just claimed, that there is this reason against starting bad lives? Notoriously, David Heyd denies this, holding our duties are to existing people, or at least to those who will exist anyway.[15] So of course there can be reason to end a bad life, and reason to end it pretty much as soon as it soon begins; but this doesn't, he thinks, work its way backwards to any imposition prior to life's beginning. Yet it seems obvious to many that if we should end a life as soon as it begins, there must be reason to prevent its beginning in the first place. And it seems we can insist on there being some such reason, insist on its being a bad thing, bad that this life is started, even if there might be doubt about whether it really is bad for someone to come into existence with a bad life, and doubt too whether they are harmed or made worse off by this.[16] So much for Heyd. The problem now, though, is that this strategy, as an aid to the Asymmetry, threatens immediately to backfire. There are overall good lives. And there is reason to save such lives, and to save them, *ab initio*, from the threat of death. But then if this is so, surely, again obviously, there is reason to start these lives. As coming into existence can't be a complete game-changer where bad lives are concerned, so too with good lives. It appears, as McMahan suspects, that symmetry is hard to deny. And it appears, then, that the pull to something akin to the Total View, or Pro-Natalism, is, after all, considerable.

There is a reply. For we can very plausibly deny that there is always such a reason to save these overall good lives, lives in which pleasures predominate. Consider animals. We can agree that their pleasures are real, and agree too that for all times at which they exist, there are reasons to increase their pleasures. An animal, if lucky, or if well-tended, might have a life which, as it will seem, is overall good, in that its pleasures outnumber and outweigh its pains. Even so, we can deny that a sudden and painless death is bad for this animal. For, modifying the Deprivation Account of death's badness,[17] we can, I'll claim, plausibly hold that death is bad not simply when it ends a good life but only when this life is one that its possessor wants to continue.[18] We might, then, hold that

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[14] I'm going to assume throughout that the distribution of parts in overall good/bad lives is roughly even or uniform, and so sidestep complications. For, of course, if someone has got through the bad, there is no reason to end an overall bad life, and if done with the good, then reason to end an overall good life.

[15] David Heyd, *Genethics: Moral Issues in the Creation of People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). And see the discussion in McMahan (2009) pp. 59–60.

[16] See Derek Parfit, Appendix G: 'Whether Causing Someone to Exist can Benefit this Person' in *Reasons and Persons*, (The Clarendon Press, 1984) pp. 487–491, and Elizabeth Harman, 'Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?' *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004) pp. 89–113 for useful discussion. See also Jeff McMahan, 'Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives', *The Journal of Ethics* 17 (2013) pp. 5–35.

[17] See for a recent presentation, with reference to several earlier discussions, Andrés Garcia and Berit Braun 'Reconciling the Deprivation Account with the Final Badness of Death', *Journal of Value Inquiry* (November 2022).

[18] We might refine this in two ways. First, we might say it is bad *for* the healthy tree if it dies, but still it is not a bad thing, not bad *that* the tree dies. So there is no reason to prevent it from dying. Second, it can plainly be a bad thing, bad that someone asleep, or in a coma dies, even if they have no categorical desires. See Section V for more on this second point.

only for those with what have been called categorical desires can death be bad.[19] So then it's bad for most persons, the likes of you and me, those who have conceptions of, investments in, and desires for a future life. But it isn't bad for those who are unable to have such conceptions, investments, desires. And so it's not bad for at least many animals. Now I don't suggest this is an uncontroversial claim, but it's not outrageous.[20] And more successful opposition will come from those who hold not only that it's bad for animals to die, but also that it's bad for them not to be born in the first place. Successful opposition, then, will resist the claim being considered here, that starting good lives isn't required, and will instead side with the Total View.

More outrageous, surely, is the further claim that a painless death is similarly not bad for fetuses and neonates who, similarly are not persons, and similarly have no conceptions of, interests in and desires for a future life. Still, this is the claim I now want to make. And let me be clear – the claim is not just that for those who will never be persons (and so for those who will in any event die early, or who though they live long have psychologies that are unable properly to develop) is death not bad; the claim is that similarly death isn't bad for those who are not yet persons, even when it is pretty much certain that they later will be, and certain, too, that in these later stages, when they do want to live on, death will be bad. Of course there will be objections, some of which I consider later, but if this is right then the position that Asymmetrists and Anti-Natalists both want to adopt – starting good lives isn't required – is, contrary to some early impressions, far from puzzling. For if we can plausibly deny there is reason to save a life in its early and underdeveloped stages, we can surely deny there is reason to start this life. So then, there is no reason, absenting side effects, to start any life. For, as a matter of fact the only lives we are able to start are those who, at this start, are non-persons.[21]

It is surely surprising that McMahan, well-known for extensive and important discussion of psychological continuity and connectedness, and its relation to personhood, should barely so much as touch on these matters here. Though it won't fully explain the Asymmetry, an appeal to such distinctions will counter the pull to a more symmetrical view. We can now see how it can be maintained that, although starting bad lives is forbidden, starting good lives is not required. For even if pleasure is intrinsically good – good because of how it is in itself, its immediate raw feel, rather than because of its effects – there is no reason to hold also that it is intrinsically valuable, so that the more of it the better.[22] So there is no reason to bring into or keep in existence all the locations, all the organisms, where pleasure might be found. And anyone wanting to offer, and then to explain, support for any version of the Total View still has considerable work to do.

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[19] For categorical desires see Bernard Williams, 'The Makropoulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality' in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge University Press, 1973) See also Peter Singer *Practical Ethics* (Cambridge University Press 1979) where a leaning toward preference utilitarianism gives a similar result.

[20] And this non-outrageous claim is one that stands independently of present concerns. It isn't being proposed here simply as a device for supporting the claim that there are no reasons to start a life.

[21] See note 27 for some discussion of the claim here.

[22] Another way of putting this involves contrasting something's being valued for itself and being valuable – so ought to be valued – in itself.

IV

McMahan insists that Anti-Natalism is highly counterintuitive. Benatar agrees. And so, of course, do I. But there are two parts to the Asymmetry's controversial component. And if it is to win out it needs to be shown, not only that starting overall good lives is not required but further, that such starting is nevertheless permitted. Yet give proper attention not simply to lives as a whole but to their component parts and difficulties will emerge.

With just a few exceptions the bad lives, those we are forbidden to start, are bad not through and through, but only in (albeit many) parts. We might think that each of these bad parts gives us some reason against starting the life and that the good parts, whether or not they provide reasons for starting, are in these cases clearly outnumbered and outweighed. And now won't it seem (as I implied earlier) that even with overall good lives, the bad parts – and there will be some – will give us some reason against starting? But then either the good parts provide a countervailing reason or they don't. If they do, then in some cases it seems we will after all be required to start the life. If they don't then, apparently, starting these overall good lives will also be forbidden. Holding the middle ground – permitted, rather than required or forbidden – is going to be challenging. Can the challenge be met?

McMahan of course recognises this is a problem for the Asymmetry. But it is, he insists, one that has to be solved. For otherwise we are landed with Anti-Natalism – even an iota of pain to come gives us a reason against starting a life, with no amount of pleasure giving a reason for. So then, 'Procreation would be a prima facie objectionable, essentially selfish activity'.[23] The way forward is to appeal to a further distinction within the component parts of a life:

> It seems that the Asymmetry presupposes that goods created by causing a person to exist count in one way but not another. They do not count as reasons for causing a person to exist. But they do weigh against and cancel out corresponding bads that the person's life would contain. I will refer to these two ways in which the goods that a person's life would contain might contribute to the justification for causing that person to exist as the *reason-giving function* and *the canceling function.*[24]

So the goods that will exist in a life to come can outweigh and cancel the impending bads in that life. But they cannot provide, no matter how large, any positive reason to start it. In contrast, future bads, unless and until cancelled, do provide reasons against starting the life. And, again in contrast, once personhood has developed then future goods do provide reasons to save and continue the life. In the familiar circumstances outside of procreative choices, they have more than a cancelling function.

Yet, as McMahan acknowledges, this rather elaborate story seems 'strikingly ad hoc'.[25] Not only are there differences in the powers of goods and bads, but goods themselves operate differently in different circumstances. Too little here can, thus far, be satisfactorily explained. But it appears to be the story we have to tell, if we want to stick with the Asymmetry. An alternative is to give it up. And that, I'll argue, is what we ought to do. Start with more on cancelling weight, and what might be put in its place.

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[23] McMahan (2009) p. 53. And he makes the same point in a recent, thus far, unpublished paper. It is, though, too severe. Moved by pleas to help sustain population levels, I swap my life of leisure for one of child care; or I help make a second child in response to pestering from the first.

[24] McMahan (2009) p. 53.

[25] McMahan (2009) p. 54.

Lives contain a mix of goods and bads. The goods may contrast with and distract from the bads, but typically they won't somehow cancel, remove or obliterate them. Suppose they did, then McMahan's claim – starting good lives, though not required, is permitted – might appear plausible. Even if goods give no positive reason for, still there'd be no bads, and so no reason against such lives. But, of course, there is no such power in goods, and bads will continue to exist. So perhaps McMahan means that the promise of a preponderance of goods will cancel, remove, obliterate not the bads themselves but any reason to be concerned or to care about them. But this is implausible. If we can reduce the bads in this future life, while leaving the goods intact, surely we have reason to do so. It looks, thus far, as if this cancelling notion isn't doing the work demanded of it.

So consider instead the notion of compensation – related, but importantly different. The bads in your life can't be removed but there's available some good to soften the blow, or as a form of payback or return for your suffering the bad. Take some everyday cases. You elect to undergo a serious and debilitating operation in order to extend your life, or you fork out for dental work to enjoy again the delights of ice cream. The bads here are necessary for the goods. But many pains have no instrumental value, and if easily avoided would be. But it isn't easy. So suppose you're prone to migraine, or heartburn, or a gammy leg. You can end your life and be rid of the bads, or continue, with goods and bads both in place. Most often, you will, quite sensibly, make the latter choice, preferring a compromised life to no life at all. In both sorts of case, then, we can think in terms of compensation – pleasures not only outweigh pains but give us reason to accept or at least to tolerate the pains.

This doesn't, however, provide any wholesale support for commonplace beliefs about good or worthwhile lives. For first, only people, or persons, I want to say, can be properly compensated for their pains. Only they can have the focused future desires that give them reason to suffer present (or near future) pain as a route to future (or further future) pleasure. Animals, pretty much stuck in the moment, can't do this. So their pains, each of them in effect detached from what occurs in other moments, are unambiguously bad. Animals, I've said, can have no desires for future pleasures and so have no reason to put up with pain for the sake of such pleasures. We, in turn, can have no reason to cause or permit them pains, as an aid to satisfying their desires. So then, and as McMahan allows, bads count against starting their lives, and goods don't count for. But, further, bads count against continuing these lives, and so count for ending them, while goods count neither for continuing, nor against ending them. So better for them never to have been, and given there are further pains ahead, better that they cease to be, at least before these pains kick in.

We should not be speciesists. And, second, there is no relevant difference here between typical animals and those babies or neonates who, because of death, damage or disease, will never develop into persons. As before, we're taking it, against Pro-Natalism, that starting, no matter how good the life to come, isn't required. But the pains to come provide reasons against starting, and as a counter to these reasons pleasures to come are ineffective. We shouldn't start the lives of these babies, and if started then – so long as we are thinking just of them – we should end them. And this even when good parts outweigh and outnumber the bad.

Most babies develop into people, into persons, not dissimilar from the likes of you and me. Does this make a difference? Or course it does. Probably by far the majority of our pains, most of which occur after our early years, will be compensated by pleasures still to come. These pains, when they occur, give no decisive reason to end our lives, nor, beforehand, to block our existence. But all of us begin life with a period wherein pains

are uncompensated. And that there will be such pains does give reasons against starting, reasons against which pleasures to come are, once more, ineffective. No matter how good our lives turn out to be, how strong will be the reasons then for saving them, none of these lives are ones that, for our sake, anyone is required to start. Asymmetrists and Anti-Natalists agree with this. And the claim here is that they are, moreover, ones it is forbidden to start. Suppose a life is started. Then, at least until compensation kicks in, it should, because of its pains, be ended.

So McMahan is wrong, I've argued, to think the Asymmetry might be defensible. If starting isn't required it can't, given that pains are uncompensated, be permitted.[26] Is Benatar, holding that starting is forbidden, then right? Unqualified, this claim has to go. Imagine there is no pain until the development of personhood is well under way. Or imagine someone could come into existence 'fully formed', already a person.[27] There is no objection to starting such lives. Other situations are more familiar. We might anticipate not merely an iota, but massive amounts of pain in a life still to come and still have no reason, in respect of this pain, to prevent the life from beginning. For most of our pain comes to us as persons, with much of it compensated by its relation to our later pleasures. And consider pain occurring right alongside pleasure – you enjoy a blistering curry, or in rugby struggle to retrieve the ball. No complex psychology is needed for such mixed experience, and pain like this, possible for persons and non-persons alike, provides no reason to block existence.[28]

A second claim, that Anti-Natalism in no way implies Pro-Mortalism, also has to go. For, according to my account, those very considerations which give us grounds for preventing a birth often justify us, when prevention is missed, in causing a death. And indeed, both writers come unstuck around here. For, and as I suggested in the introduction, they both make too much of the distinction between procreative and more familiar choices, or between starting/preventing, on the one hand, and saving/ending on the other. And they make way too little of the person/non-person distinction. But get these things right and many of the puzzles about bringing people into existence can be satisfactorily addressed. Absenting the Total View, then starting a life, for its sake, is never required. Assuming, what is surely plausible, that in the early stages there'll always be some uncompensated pain, then starting this life is also forbidden.

V

There are, of course, going to be many objections to the anti-natalist position set out here. These need now to be considered.

Start with my claim that as animals don't have categorical desires, so death is not bad for them, or at least is not bad in a way that gives us any reason, for their sake, to prevent their deaths. But now it will be insisted that there are many cases in which animal

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[26] An exception. Bill and Ben both have worthwhile lives. Bill dies suddenly at 80. Ben lives another year, in considerable pain. He asks for euthanasia, but it isn't permitted. It doesn't follow, from there being this uncompensated pain at the end of his life, that his life ought not to have been started.

[27] As supposedly does Athena – see McMahan (2009) p. 60. I claim here that starting such a life would be permitted, not that it would be required. But imagine we can go out of, and later come back into, existence. Restarting a life, like saving, might well be required. Perhaps all the puzzle here points to is the difficulty in making proper sense of Athena.

[28] Am I rolling back on the earlier claim that animal pain cannot be compensated by pleasure? Not really. I'm thinking of pain in such cases as a part of what we enjoy, rather than something bad for which a good later makes amends.

behaviour gives the lie to this – squirrels build nests and store nuts in preparation for the winter, birds set out on arduous journeys across and around the globe, dogs anticipate and evidently look forward to their evening walk. There are several counters – much of this is simply instinctive, future desires might be conditional rather than categorical, not all animals are equal. And the last of these will suffice. For, as with the onset of personhood, I have no need to insist on any sharp human/non-human divide, wanting to claim only that there are myriad cases where it seems clear that animals have no awareness of, or hopes and plans for the future, and then that it seems equally clear that the sudden painless death of this animal is not something we have reason to prevent, should prevent or regret. And if there is no reason to sustain the life of this animal, there is no reason either to start it. Further, given that the animal to some extent suffers, there is reason not to start, and reason (so long as there is more suffering ahead) to end its life. The follow-up claim here is simply that human beings, in their early days, are less psychologically sophisticated than are many animals in their maturity.

The objection can, however, take a different form. McMahan long ago noted that the deprivation view of death is at odds with the widespread belief that the demise of, say, a 16-year-old child is worse than that of a 16-week baby.[29] The view certainly needs at least amending, but his suggestion here – death's badness is a function of both the goods lost and the degree of psychological connection between present and future – allows for different interpretations. On my account neither value can be zero – if there are just no future goods to be had, or alternatively if there is just no connection between present and future mental states, then death isn't bad at all. But McMahan appears to think it is to some degree bad for someone or something to die whenever there will be some future goods, even if there is currently no awareness of or desire for these goods.

Suppose, as is the case, that I am unpersuaded. Won't there now be a further objection, that I'm at risk of proving too much? For doesn't it appear that I must hold, surely counterintuitively, that it isn't bad either for comatose or for seriously depressed people to die? The first have no desires whatsoever while the second may well want death rather than life. My insistence on the importance of categorical desires is, it seems, misplaced.

The reply is straightforward, and demands only a minor refinement. I'll deny that death is bad not when categorical desires are temporarily absent, but when they are either gone, never to return, or have yet to make their first appearance. A further refinement: death's badness requires not only that we have categorical desires at or before the time of death but also that future desires resemble and relate to those of the present or past. A depressed teenager wants to die. There is no point in treatment that so messes with her mind that it in effect replaces her with another teenager – a different person – who then wants to live.[30]

A related but more stubborn objection will attach firmly to the centre of the debate. Suppose I'm right to emphasise the person/non-person distinction. Still, the claim will go, there's an important distinction to be made between those – most animals, some humans – who will never be persons, and those – almost all our children – who, if they don't prematurely die, will develop into persons, and so into those who, even though they have no hopes for the future right now, will develop such hopes a little later. Surely, the thought goes, it is at least permitted to bring such creatures into existence.

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[29] See Jeff McMahan, 'Death and the Value of Life', *Ethics* 99:1 (1988).

[30] Though of course, on the Total View there is point. And see here McMahan's discussion of 'The Cure' in *The Ethics of Killing* (Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 77.

I stick to my guns. Contrast three cases. In the first, ordinary people turn out to have extraordinary origins. A creature is born, lives for four years and then dies. From its residues a second creature in time emerges. This second creature, much like one of us, has for decades an overall good life, is glad to have been born and glad too, as a condition of this, that the earlier creature was born. But that first creature, never a person, has a life involving non-negligible uncompensated pain. Taken on its own, starting this life, even if pleasures outnumber pains, would be forbidden. Perhaps we could justify this starting, had we needed this creature to facilitate some good. But though, taken on its own, starting the second life would be permitted, it isn't, according to supporters of the Asymmetry, to any degree required. So then the pair of lives ought not to be started.

In a second case there is just the one creature. But after four years it enters a kind of hibernation, later emerging suddenly and magically transformed, like a butterfly from a caterpillar. In its earlier stage the creature once again suffers some uncompensated pain. Later it is once again a person, glad to have been born. That there is here just the one birth, one creature, the one life, makes no difference. Given that starting isn't required it is, in such a case, forbidden.

The third case is our own. Changes are gradual and less intense. Nevertheless, there is still an extended period, prior to our becoming persons, wherein pains are uncompensated by surrounding pleasures. Can they be compensated by later pleasures? Can I think, I know there were bad times earlier, but life now is good, and I wouldn't want to undo any of the steps that got me here? Well, certainly we can think this, but predictable satisfactions provide no one with a reason to start a life. Predictable distress does, however, give reason against. Can I early on think, I know life is bad now, with present pains uncompensated, but it will get better and I'm prepared to accept my lot so that this better life, a later part of my life, can later be lived? Well, a person might have some such thoughts, but there's no need here to work through their implications. For a non-person, a baby or neonate, can't begin to think along such lines, can't take an interest in its own future. So accept the Asymmetry, reject all versions of the Total View and then, given a plausible picture of what our lives are actually like – in particular the inevitability of uncompensated pain – Anti-Natalism goes through. So then reject the Asymmetry.

The objections so far might well be advanced by someone hoping to defend the commonsense position that, along with saving lives, starting is at least permitted. What I need finally to consider is an insistence that my strategy is otiose, as there is a far better route to the Anti-Natalist conclusion.

How can we marry together Anti-Natalism and Anti-Mortalism, so forbidding the starting of lives, but permitting, even encouraging, their saving, once started?[31] Benatar appeals here to the threshold or dual benchmark view – the bar is higher for beginning with such and such than for continuing with it. There are indeed many instances of this – think of the job market; I might want a higher standard to employ someone than, once they're in work, to keep them on. Or the figs that are not worth picking, but if on a plate in front of you are worth eating. Or Benatar's own example – I might decide a film isn't worth watching but if I'm halfway through I may as well stick with it. And he gives also a plausible

[31] Of course, someone might think if we are against death we should not only permit but promote living on. I am sympathetic, but I have no need of the stronger claim here.

sounding case concerning procreation: we think it's best not to bring into existence a child missing a limb, but once in existence, find here no reason to end its life.[32]

So far so good, but not yet far enough. The aim is to uncover reasoned and defensible positions on starting lives, not simply to observe some quirky practices. So we need to ask, how can these shifts in standards be explained? In many cases there's a simple appeal to costs: there's more effort required in picking than eating figs; I don't want an hour-long queue for this film; if we hire her we'll then have to train her. But the figs, the film, the eventual fitness for the job are unchanged. There's no progress being made here, via noting these side-effect concerns, in understanding procreation issues, where allegedly it's bad for the child, rather than for existing people, if that child comes into existence. And threshold concerns typically surface in a narrow band between surefire winners and hopeless cases – many people are clearly worth hiring, many others though hired should now be fired; only a few will have jobs that are worth saving but not worth starting. But the Anti-Natalist's claim that virtually no life should be started makes for difficulties here. Surely no more than a handful of cases will be anywhere near enough to the threshold. So we can press the matter again, just what is it that cuts in at procreation time; before this you should (almost) never make a child, afterwards you should in almost all cases keep the child alive?[33]

Unsurprisingly, Benatar appears to feel the pull of the question here, and asks what gives rise to the child's mattering morally. And then, surprisingly, his answer seems not to be a million miles from mine:

> Arguably my conception was the time I came into existence in the strict ontological sense. But it is much less clear that this was also the moment that I came into existence in a morally relevant sense …. Those who exist (in the morally relevant sense) have interests in existing. These interests, once fully developed, are typically very strong and thus, where there is a conflict, they override interests in not being impaired. However, where there are no (or very weak) interests in existing, causing impairments (by bringing people with defects into being) cannot be warranted by the protection of such interests.[34]

So then a lasting change, in the child, that offers to explain why, though starting is forbidden, saving hereafter is at least permitted, and maybe also required. But there's an unnoted ambiguity. We can understand interests as linking either with benefits, or with desires. It might be in a tree's interests to be watered – this is good for, will benefit, the tree. But the tree has no desire that it be watered. Conversely, someone, some person, might desire a second pizza, or to live into her 90s even when neither of these will be good for her. My claim, of course, is that personhood, and with it the desire for more life, is of critical importance here. Given these, there are often reasons to continue a life – it is often worth continuing. But without them there are no such reasons. Add in, the non-person is or will be in pain, and there are reasons to end the life. Suppose Benatar is thinking of

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[32] See Benatar (2006) p. 23. Plausible sounding, but too long a discussion would be needed to identify and consider the nest of problems with this example.

[33] Suppose that being born is almost intolerably painful, not for the mother, but for the child. Here's a reason to avoid starting, and one focused just on the child, that simply vanishes once the birth is over. It's explicitly starting on, rather than continuing in existence that is unacceptable. But there's been no suggestion, and nor could there be, that such early and passing trauma sits behind Anti-Natalism, where an iota of pain at any time supposedly gives reason to prevent starting.

[34] Benatar (2006) p. 25.

desires. Then perhaps this, or something very close, is his point here. But then, first, his point is my point and, second, his point is at odds both with what appear to be several of his primary contentions throughout and with his comments thus far on the threshold view. The distinction between persons and non-persons is not at all that between present and future people, restricting those who matter morally just to persons is indefensible, and personhood kicks in much later than does acquiring interests. But there's really no need for speculation as to whether our views coincide. He says:

> Dr. Belshaw thinks that his own argument for anti-natalism fares better than mine. Very little needs to be said to show how implausible that claim is. His argument rests on deeply controversial premises. Some of these are moral claims, such as the claim that pro-mortalism is true for babies. That is to say, his argument requires us to believe that killing human babies never wrongs them. Other claims on which his argument rests are not moral but rather metaphysical. Thus, he thinks that he, and you and I were never babies – that a person and the baby from which he or she grew are metaphysically distinct. These claims are far more controversial than any premise in my argument. Good arguments start from firm premises. Since my premises are much firmer than his, it is very hard to see how his argument for anti-natalism is an improvement over mine.[35]

Of course, I allow that some of my claims are controversial. But I've never claimed, though I note that others have claimed, that persons and babies are metaphysically distinct. There is, on my view, one organism, one human being that goes through importantly different phases. What about killing human babies? If we should prevent them from coming into existence then supposing we fail to do this we should, I've suggested, take them out of existence as soon as possible. And it is surprising that Benatar, against birth, is not, even in these limited circumstances, for death. Equally surprising, perhaps, are his contentions here about an argument's structure. Certainly, firm premises matter. But aren't some of my alleged premises better seen as interim conclusions? I've claimed, for example, that there is no reason, discounting side-effects, to save babies from a painless death. But that claim doesn't come out of the blue. Even if unsuccessfully, I've argued for it. And I think it's firm.

As well as comparing premises we can contrast conclusions. Suppose your life goes swimmingly from beginning to end, except for one day in your 30s when you suffer an hour's toothache. There are no pains whatsoever before this time. Benatar insists it would be better had you never been born. My version of anti-natalism issues no such claim. Someone might well doubt how you can reach Benatar's highly controversial conclusion, working only from uncontroversial premises.

VI

We almost all agree about bad lives – they shouldn't be started – while disagreeing profoundly about overall good lives. Some people think there are reasons, unconnected to benefits for existing people, to start such lives. I haven't attempted here to disprove such views, even though I've pointed to weaknesses attaching to their defence. I've focused instead on claims that there is no reason, absenting side-effects, to start such lives. I agree with the Asymmetrists that such starting isn't required. But I disagree that this is hard to

[35] David Benatar, 'Every Conceivable Harm', *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31:1 (2012) p. 163.

explain. I've appealed, in support of this, to the person/non-person distinction. There is no reason, I've said, to extend the lives of those in whom a desire for this extension is not yet developed. So there is no reason to save, either for their sake or for the sake of the universe, the lives of non-persons, including babies and animals. Unsurprisingly, then, there is no reason to start these lives.

So far so good, but here I've parted from the Asymmetrists, arguing further that not only is starting these lives not required but it is, as Anti-Natalists maintain, not permitted. The lives of both persons and non-persons contain, alongside the good, some bad parts. Where persons are concerned, and psychological connectedness is pronounced, these bad parts can be not only outnumbered and outweighed, but also often compensated by the good parts. So then there is reason against starting the bad parts, but reason also, and more reason, for starting the good parts. In the psychologically fragmented lives of non-persons, where the different parts are effectively separate from one another, such compensating isn't possible. There is reason against the bad parts but no reason for the good parts. There is reason, then, against the whole. So the Asymmetry, though it appears to enjoy widespread support, represents, I've claimed, an inherently unstable position. Given that good lives have within them bad parts, and there is always reason to be rid of these parts, then the combination, permitted but not required, is not one we can maintain.

I've parted company from the Anti-Natalists also. In paying so little attention to the person/non-person distinction Anti-Natalism in its classic form is landed with an implausibly broad-brush approach to the badness of pain. That someone will suffer a headache one day in their mid-40s when, of course, they want to go on living, is no reason to prevent them from coming into existence.

I've asked, about starting lives, what we have reason to do, when other-regarding reasons are set aside. And I've answered, we should refrain from such starting. Does this mean we ought not to have children? Not at all. Other-regarding reasons are often important reasons. Nor have I said that we should always do what reason requires us to do.

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