

Term Paper

In this paper, I will first, introduce Benatar's 'Asymmetry' argument for why it is better never to exist. Second, introduce Harman's first objection, and then, I will explain the misconception she makes regarding Benatar's 'Asymmetry' argument. That is, *Harman's claim based on the reconstruction of the argument is not compatible with Benatar's main argument*. Finally, I will support my explanation by introducing the non-identity problem and explaining why Benatar's 'Asymmetry' argument solves the non-identity problem.

In his article, 'Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence', Benatar introduces a morally relevant distinction between harms and benefits when human life has come into existence. It follows a symmetrical relationship (Benatar, 345):

1. The presence of pain is bad.
2. The presence of pleasure is good.

and an asymmetrical relationship (Benatar, 346):

3. The absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone.
4. The absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.

notice that the symmetrical relationship is widely accepted. It is a subject of common knowledge and need not be further explained. According to Benatar, his view of the asymmetrical relationship is also widely shared (Benatar, 346). It follows with three supporting explanations. The first explanation suggests that it is wrong to bring people into existence because they will suffer, and suffering is bad. Absence of suffering is good, even though without bringing someone into existence means there is no one to enjoy the absence of suffering (Benatar, 346). The second explanation suggests that we sometimes avoid bringing someone into existence because we know

that they will suffer, but we never bring them into existence because they will be benefited (Benatar, 346). That is, Benatar suggests the concept of positive duty. According to Benatar, we must avoid making people suffer, but we do not have a duty to make someone feel pleasure. The third explanation suggests that we can regret both bringing someone into existence or not (Benatar, 347). However, only bringing someone into existence can be regretted for the sake of the person who was brought into existence. Regretting not bringing someone into existence is self-directed.

After justifying the asymmetrical relationship, Benatar introduces a thought experiment that consists of two possible worlds (Benatar, 347). One with person X exists, and the other does not. In the world that the person X exists, there are:

1. presence of pain which strikes as bad, and
2. presence of pleasure which strikes as good.

in the world that person X does not exist, there are:

3. absence of pain which strikes as good, and
4. absence of pleasure which strikes as not bad.

By comparing 1 and 3, it is obvious the world that person X does not exist is a preferable world (Benatar, 348). However, we may not be able to make the same conclusion by comparing 2 and 4. Even though, presence of pleasure does not hold any advantage over the absence of pleasure. According to Benatar, it is better not to come into existence. That is, come into existence involves pain which is bad. Not come into existence, however, does not involve any bad aspect of life.

Harman's first objection offers a 'plausible' reading which extracts more contents of the first part of the asymmetry. According to Harman (Harman, 780),

- a. The presence of pain which strikes as bad is regarded both personally and impersonally.

The absence of pain which strikes as good, however, is regarded impersonally only.

Notice that there is no comparison between personal bad and impersonal good. Hence, either Benatar's asymmetry relationship falls apart or Benatar needs something else to achieve the asymmetry relationship. If Benatar wants to achieve the asymmetry relationship, what he needs is this claim (Harman, 780):

- b. The presence of pain which strikes as bad (for the one who experiences it).

The absence of pain which strikes as good (for the person who would have experienced the pain and does not actually exist).

According to Harman, Benatar must rely on the following claim (*) to achieve the asymmetry relationship:

- (*). An action harms a person by causing some effects only if experiencing those effects is worse for her than the alternative—namely, not experiencing those effects in the scenario in which the action is not performed. An action benefits a person by causing some effects only if experiencing those effects is better for her than the alternative—namely, not experiencing those effects in the scenario in which the action is not performed. (Harman, 779)

If Benatar relies on (*) to achieve b, then it must be the case that an individual's non-existence is better than otherwise existence. In conclusion, Harman's reconstruction of the argument grants the asymmetry relationship given that the asymmetry relationship is based on (*). That is, there must be a comparison between existence and non-existence.

I do not think Harman's claim (*) is compatible with Benatar's main argument. To explore such compatibility issues, I think it is important to introduce the concept of the nonidentity problem. Consider the following two cases (Harman, 89):

1. Child named X has come into existence with pain and suffering due to the harmful drug that her mother intentionally took during pregnancy.
2. Child named Y has come into existence with pain and suffering due to the genetic selection that her mother intentionally took before pregnancy.

many people believe that both X and Y were wronged by their mother. How X was wronged by her mother is straight forward. By taking such a harmful drug during pregnancy, X's mother intentionally caused her child's pain and suffering. If she did not take such a harmful drug, X's life would be much better, and not to experience any of the pain and suffering that X would otherwise experience. Naturally, one may be attempted to make the same conclusion for Y and claim that Y was also wronged by her mother. However, this claim appears to be problematic. The difference between X and Y is that although X would still have existed had his mother not taking the drug. Y is nonidentical to anyone who would have existed had his mother not making the genetic selection. That is, if Y's mother did not make such genetic selection, then Y will not come into existence. Philosopher such as Harman appeals to a plausible theory of harming to argue that there is a difference of what would happen to make a moral difference. According to their theory, an action harms you only if it makes you worse off than you would have been had the action not been performed (Harman, 90). As mentioned above, X's case satisfies such a theory. However, Y's condition does not satisfy such a theory, even though his life is full of pain and suffering. Because Y's alternative life is nonexistence and there is no comparison for nonexistence. If we accept such a plausible theory, then Y was not wronged by his mother.

Hence, we fail to justify the intuition that Y was harmed by his mother. At this point, I want to mention two things. First, this plausible theory of harming seems to work the same way as Harman's claim (*), a result of Harman's reconstruction of the argument. Second, in Harman's paper 'Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating', she made an argument to deny the plausible theory of harming and endorse other conditions for harm (Harman, 107). However, for the sake of this paper, I will not explain the conditions that Harman endorses as they are irrelevant to the purpose of this paper. Moreover, instead of denying Harman's claim (*), I will show that it is incompatible with Benatar's main argument.

Y's situation is a nonidentity case, he appears to be wronged by something that serves as a condition of his existence. The problem follows as either justifying how Y was wronged or explaining why Y was not wronged. Hence, a set of inconsistency claims can be formed:

1. Y was wronged by his mother.
2. If Y was wronged by his mother, then the way she wronged him was by harming him.
3. The only way Y could be harmed is that his mother made his life worse than he otherwise would have been.
4. It is not the case that Y's mother made Y's life worse than he otherwise would have been.

That is, these claims cannot all be true at the same time. By accepting any three of these claims are true, their conjunction will logically entail that the fourth one is false. To solve the nonidentity problem, one must reject at least one of these claims and explain why our original intuition is wrong. Upon dealing with such a problem, Benatar offers an antinatalism's solution. It is a philosophical position that grants a negative value to birth. Based on this, I reconstruct the above inconsistency claims 1-4 as following:

- 1*. Procreation is categorically wrong.

2*. If procreation is categorically wrong, then the way it wronged those being brought into existence is by harming them.

3*. The only way that procreation harms those being brought into existence is by making their life worse off than they otherwise would have been.

4*. It is not the case that procreation makes those being brought into existence worse off than they otherwise would have been.

At this point, I recognize that Harman's claim (*) is equivalent to 3*. It leads to the conclusion that Harman's first objection is equivalent to accept 3*. However, Benatar's main argument denies 3*. In Benatar's view, whether an action is harmful has to do with whether it confers advantages and disadvantages. Benatar's asymmetry argument makes the case that there is a clear disadvantage to existing over never existing at all, on one hand. On the other hand, there are not comparative advantages of existence over non-existence even if lives can be filled with pleasure. The absence of pleasure in a world that we never existed would not be bad. Therefore, concluded by Benatar, procreation is categorically wrong, this includes the non-identity cases. At this point, we can conclude that *Harman's claim based on the reconstruction of the argument is not compatible with Benatar's main argument*, because it would be a mistake to grant claim (*) to Benatar which he denies it.

References

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