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Justifying Goods
Max Stone

Introduction
In this paper, I will critically evaluate three arguments for antinatalism. First, I present David Benatar’s Asymmetry Argument, a philanthropic argument which I conclude is not successful because of an objection from Elizabeth Harman. Then, I gloss a different philanthropic argument offered by Christian Lee: The Disproportionate Duties Argument. Afterwards, I examine a Misanthropic Argument offered by David Benatar. In response to the DDA and MA I borrow from the vast literature reconciling the argument from evil in the philosophy of religion. I conclude that there are goods like free-will, loving relationships, and friendship in human life that render procreation permissible in most cases, even if we experience pain and suffering.

Philanthropic Arguments
Philanthropic arguments suggest that there are a variety of harms that humans universally endure, and that procreation is wrong, because it exposes people to these harms without benefiting them. One philanthropic argument David Benatar employs for the antinatalist conclusion in his book Better Never to Have Been is the Asymmetry Argument. Although it is not explicitly in his book the argument seems to be as follows:

Asymmetry Argument
1) Procreation always harms the child
2) Procreation never benefits the child
3) If procreation always harms and never benefits the child, then it is morally impermissible
4) So, Procreation is morally impermissible

The argument is valid and offers relatively simple premises. In defense of (1), Benatar suggests that one only needs to recognize that “all lives contain some bad”\(^{iii}\). This claim is an empirical one, he does not suggest here that lives necessarily contain some bad or that there is essentially some bad in every life. Rather, he rightly observes that “bad things happen to all of us”\(^{iii}\). The fact of all lives containing some bad is easy to concede. As Benatar points out, we find the ubiquity of suffering, no matter how slight, in the world, in our lives, and in our memories by simply looking around and feeling. He evaluates the badness of human lives in the context of three popular theories of well-being: hedonism, desire-fulfillment, and objective list theories. Hedonism is a theory of well-being that suggests that what is good for a person is pleasure and what is bad for them is pain. Desire-fulfillment theory purports that the fulfillment of desires is good for a person, whereas unfulfilled desires are bad for them. Lastly, objective list
theory says that what is good for a person is not merely either pleasure or desire-fulfillment, rather it is a plurality of goods that might make life better for a person. Thus, according to Benatar, any plausible theory of well-being shows that life contains at least some of what is bad.

In a hedonist assessment of well-being, he appeals to “how much of life is characterized by negative mental states”. These feelings like hunger, thirst, and stress plague the everyday life of all people. However, this is just the baseline bad. Other worse conditions are experienced by many but not all individuals. Allergies, migraines, and seizures are just some of the suffering inducing maladies that a person might go through. Even more severe suffering like that which Europe’s Jewry experienced in World War Two at the hands of Nazi persecution affected millions of people. Under a desire-fulfillment view, Benatar shows that “little of life is characterized by satisfied desires and rather a lot is marked by unsatisfied desires”. For the very nature of desire-fulfillment suggests that there must be a desire to be fulfilled in the first place. Thus, even if desires are fulfilled there is always some significant amount of time before so that it is unfulfilled. Desires like hunger and rest often go unfulfilled for hours before being satiated, and that happens every day if not more frequently. Whereas long-term desires like independence, success, and romantic love often take years to attain. In some cases, these desires go completely unattained. Some people never accomplish their lifelong goals or attain the wisdom they sought in their youth. Under the terms of an objective list view, we can simply extend our discussion of hedonism and desire-fulfillment to showcase its bads, because elements of both these views will feature in the objective list. Thus, our same negative mental states and unfulfilled desires qualify.

One initial worry for Benatar’s defense of (1) might pertain to our understanding of harm. It seems that for these three theories of well-being Benatar makes a strong case as to why life contains some bad element. However, it is not clear if that premise entails procreation always harming the procreated. The truth of this conditional depends on our understanding of harm. For it does not appear that procreation causes any of these harms directly. My being born does allow for the capacity to be harmed, but it does not appear to cause me to be tired or hungry. What causes me to be tired or hungry is that I haven't eaten or slept enough. To analogize, if I build a house, it does not seem to be the case that I cause it to have wear and tear or even that I am withering the house in building it. The act of procreation is an act of creation, people have sex and fertilization leads to the creation of a zygote which eventually grows and is birthed. No part of that act appears to directly harm or benefit the procreated. The act doesn’t cause any bad thing to happen to the procreated, it merely creates the potential for bad to happen. The essential question here seems to surround whether people can be held morally culpable for acts that create a capacity to be harmed.
This seems to be straightforward, if we have understood the likelihood of the harm and its severity to be high. If I procreate with the understanding that my child will be intermittently burned to the third-degree for their entire life until they succumb to their predicament and die, then it would seem I'm culpable even if I am not the one burning the child. However, it would appear that this resembles something more akin to negligence as opposed to harming directly. What appears to be happening with this case is still some outside entity or process burning the child. Nonetheless, whatever the case may be, we have established that existence at least has some bad in it. Benatar takes non-existence to be the zero on his x-axis of suffering and flourishing. So, existence does expose the procreated to some suffering they would not have experienced otherwise and that suffering is worse for them. Thus, instead of saying procreation harms the child, it would be more direct to blame existence for the harm.

The second premise of the argument, which states that procreation never benefits the child is at first glance harder to assent to, if we do not accept the previous objection. For, if we are ready to conclude that there is any good in a human life at all we might say that procreation also benefits the child. Although, if we accept the objection in the previous paragraph, we can easily conclude that procreation never benefits the procreated and instead that it merely creates the capacity for them to benefit. Benatar explains the premise, if we do choose to believe that procreation can harm the child. He suggests that what is at play is an inherent asymmetry between the positive and negative aspects of our well-being. In his example, he suggests that there is an asymmetry between pain and pleasure as follows:

1) the presence of pain is bad, and that
2) the presence of pleasure is good
3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas
4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation

Benatar offers a long commentary on the prima facie appeal of the asymmetry between (3) and (4) which is an apparent asymmetry between an absence of pain being good and the absence of pleasure being not bad. He suggests that the asymmetry between (3) and (4) has valuable explanatory power for other asymmetries. First, he argues that we have a duty to refrain from creating people that will suffer, yet no reflexive duty to create people that will flourish. Today at least, the average person does not go around creating as many children as they can possibly have. Thus, we do not look at ourselves as having a duty to create the most possible people that will flourish. Another reason he provides for support is our reflective evaluations of our judgements. When we bring people into existence we can regret doing so for their sake. Whereas, if we do not bring a child into existence we cannot regret doing so for any child's sake because there is
no child. He delves further into this idea, pointing out that “one might grieve about not having had children, but not because the children that one could have had have been deprived of existence”\(^{\text{vii}}\). Instead, our grief is directed at ourselves and the loss we have gone through, because there is no individual to direct our grief at.

(1)-(4) evidence an asymmetry based in a hedonist conception of well-being, yet Benatar argues that this structure also holds for desire-satisfaction and objective list theories. Benatar moves that when we do not procreate, the absence of a good that would have been experienced by the procreated is not bad because there is nobody for whom that absence is a deprivation while the absence of pain remains a good. This section of the argument has met strong criticism in recent work. Elizabeth Harman in her \textit{Critical Study of Better Never to Have Been} suggests that Benatar equivocates between impersonal and personal goods in (3) and (4). For Harman, when Benatar is talking about the absence of pain being good he is referring to impersonal goods, because by his own reasoning it could not be a personal good, because the person who would have been procreated does not exist. There is no one for whom absence of pain is a deprivation, thus its absence is not better for anyone than its presence. In whatever way the absence of pain or suffering is good, it must be a more general type of good. In (4) Benatar is correct by suggesting that there is no one for whom the absence of pleasure is a depravation, which remains consistent with the aforementioned lack of personal good above. However, it would be an error to suggest that in terms of impersonal goods, the absence of pleasure is not bad. If we think of this in terms of the sheer value theory at play here, more pain is bad, and more pleasure is good. That evaluation can be made overall (impersonally) or for a person (personally). In both cases there is no person, yet overall, how could we not say that less pain is good and that more pleasure is good and the converse.

A different type of asymmetry argument, proposed by my advisor for this paper Christian Lee, circumvents the issue articulated by Harman. As opposed to suggesting that an asymmetry exists between pain and pleasure or other signifiers of well-being, Lee takes a Rossian approach and suggests that our duties to not harm others and to benefit others are asymmetrical. The \textit{Disproportionate Duties Argument} is as follows:

\textit{Disproportionate Duties Argument}

1) We have a prima facie duty not to harm, or cause something bad to happen to another.

2) We have a prima facie duty to benefit, or to cause something good to happen to another.

3) The prima facie duty not to harm, or cause bad things to happen to another, outweighs a prima facie duty to benefit, or to cause good things to happen to another, unless the benefit (good) far exceeds the harm (bad) to them.
4) In procreating we harm and benefit, but the benefit does not far exceed the harm we cause to another.
5) If (1) through (4) are true, then procreation is wrong.
6) So, procreation is wrong.

At first glance, this argument is much more straightforward than Benatar's *Asymmetry Argument*. Lee appeals to the concept of a prima facia duty which originates in W.D. Ross’ ethical theory. Ross proposed a form of deontology that bases moral permissibility on the fulfillment of a series of prima facia duties. (1) non-maleficence and (2) beneficence are two of the 5 original duties of Ross’ theory. Ross himself assented to the (3), proposing that “we think the principle ‘do evil to no one’ more pressing than the principle ‘do good to everyone’”. We should think this to be intuitive, generally we should benefit people and not harm them. Morally speaking, how could there be anything else that we do. In terms of the asymmetry of (1) and (2), harming individuals to the same extent as we benefit them seems to be still morally questionable. For example, a duty of not stealing money from others seems intuitively more important to follow than a duty of giving money to others. We tend to hold more importance in the fact that people do not cause harm in our society as opposed to the fact that they benefit others, as evidenced by our laws prohibiting the former and the lack thereof that mandate the latter. As for (4), given these disproportionate duties, even if we harmed and benefitted the procreated equally, we would still have a prima facia duty to not procreate. Lee’s argument avoids Harman’s criticism as it allows us to benefit in procreating, because it makes no claims of different types of goods accrued or not accrued by individuals.

Overall, Lee’s argument provides a good case for why we should not procreate prima facie. If we accept that we have these asymmetrical duties, then if procreation harms and benefits the procreated to a similar degree, then we should not procreate. This asymmetry of duties has its basis in two other pertinent concepts in philosophy: pure benefit and hypothetical consent. The idea behind pure benefit is that we ought not benefit individuals if in doing so we also harm them. However, hypothetical consent says that we can harm individuals to prevent greater harm. If someone is about to get hit by a car, we can assume that most people would consent to being pushed out of the way, even if that pushing entails being bruised. Conversely, imagine that I know that if I hit someone in a certain way, they will enjoy a significant pleasurable sensation. In this case, even if the pleasure is greater in proportion to the pain, pure benefit says that we are not permitted in hitting the individual.

**Misanthropic Arguments**

Benatar offers two notable arguments from a misanthropic perspective that, if correct, entail procreation’s impermissibility. Benatar’s best known misanthropic argument for
antinatalism takes the form of the Misanthropic Argument for Antinatalism. This argument appeals to the vast amounts of pain, suffering, and death caused by humans as a reason for precreation being morally impermissible. The argument proceeds as follows:

**Misanthropic Argument**

1) We have a prima facie duty to desist from bringing into existence new members of species that cause (and will likely continue to cause) vast amounts of pain, suffering and death.
2) Humans cause vast amounts of pain, suffering and death.
3) Therefore, we have a prima facie duty to desist from bringing new humans into existence. \(^{ix}\)

Benatar justifies (2) by appealing to three key milieus of human violence. First, he points out the sheer preponderance of violence that humans commit to one another. As he puts it, inhumanity towards humans, is one of the leading ways humans cause pain, death and suffering. One need only look at the 20th century as a prime example of the depraved ways humans act to one another and the sheer volume of pain we are capable of inflicting upon ourselves as a species. Next, is the pain, suffering, and death of animals or brutality towards brutes inflicted by humans. Benatar spends much of his time taking aim at factory farming, experimentation on animals, and selective breeding as causes of vast animal suffering and death. He notes the billions of animals killed in unfavorable ways every year for human consumption. Lastly, Benatar suggests a broader effect that humans have toward the environment by way of their carbon footprint and other environmentally detrimental activities. Thus, Benatar provides an uncontestable account for (2)’s truth. In defense of (1) Benatar is not saying we should kill dangerous species members or prevent the actions of others. This is just a presumptive duty to not bring about things that generally increase suffering. If we take it that suffering is bad, it follows that prima facie we should limit the creation of things that produce suffering.

Benatar insists that things are worse than we think they are. We either greatly underestimate the degree of pain and suffering in our lives, and we have an inability to conceptualize it in the lives of others and in large degrees. Pollyana syndrome, insists that we have a subconscious bias towards experiences and memories that are pleasurable for us. We remember good experiences at a higher frequency than the bad, and we overestimate the degree of good in those experiences. Benatar suggests that this mechanism is at play when we reflect on the goodness in our lives. Our lives are much worse, they just appear better, and this affects our judgements. Moreover, he points out that we are unable to truly understand the suffering of large groups and in large quantities. Our inability to grasp these phenomena is because of the problems we have with large numbers. For example, try to imagine 1 billion dogs in your mind
its near impossible. We have little reference to things of that magnitude available. Our visual capacities are prohibitive to focusing on and perceiving that many things at one time. By the same token, how is that same human supposed to conceptualize of the suffering and pain of Billions of animals while also properly weighing it in reference to other suffering and goods. In the same vein, small quantities are often overlooked for the sake of decision making and treated as non-quantities. Thus, we might also be overlooking the sheer volume of small bits of suffering we inflict.

Human experience, in its present capabilities, necessitates the suffering of others. We have no surefire way of producing purely benevolent humans. Those who are meat eaters require for their daily existence the continued suffering of hundreds if not thousands of animals annually. And, even if we elect not to do so, the raising of our other crops entails the suffering of other animals. To sustainably live with respect to the suffering of others is a very arduous process when compared to the current mainstream living style of Americans, for example. That is all without even considering the malevolent people in the world. The genocidaires, tyrants, rapists, slavers, and so on who all make the world a worse place. The degree of suffering they cause is profound. In the 20th century alone, democide, was the cause of scores of millions of deaths and immense suffering. Not to mention the almost countless others who in the same period suffered immensely from totalitarian regimes.

Justifying Goods

Both the Misanthropic Argument and Disproportionate Duties Argument lay out strong cases for why we ought not procreate. Each is undergirded by our presumptive or prima facie duty of non-maleficence. In MA it manifests as in a sub-duty which asserts that we ought not bring about an 'x' that causes suffering and death. Whereas, in the DDA our duty of non-maleficence is correctly argued as superseding our duty of beneficence. However, in both cases, a verdict of procreations moral impermissibility can only be decreed if both the empirical data is correct, and no duty or combination of duties supersedes our duty of non-maleficence. We would not be able to invoke our duty of non-maleficence in our evaluation of a given situation if the situation did not actually have the pain or suffering it purported to have. Moreover, even if the situation had the requisite suffering, it would have to have the right amount of pain and suffering, meaning the extent of pain and suffering the argument purports it to have. If we fail to establish an objection by either of those means, there are two ways we can proceed. Either we can identify (A) a Justifying Good such that the presence of that good in life entail the benefits of existing far exceeding the harms or (B) a Justifying Duty or set of duties that agents have that outweigh the duty not to harm, such that they render procreation permissible. In what follows I will canvas a few ways in which such an answer can be developed.
In the case of the Asymmetry Argument, any talk of Justifying Goods is a non-starter, because if we accept the argument, then we accept the notion that coming into existence cannot be better than non-existence. There can certainly be good things and parts of life under his view, although in no way are these good things better than non-existence. If the AA is sound, then all Benatar needs to do to reach an anti-natalist conclusion is demonstrate that life contains some bad. Luckily for the procreationist, AA fails as demonstrated by Harman. One reply might be that it misses a clear objection to AA and the existence of harm to the procreated entailing antinatalism. The procreationist might point to everyone else, and the good they experience as a result from the procreated coming into existence as being a Justifying Good. Parents love their children and derive immense pleasure from their existence. The procreationist might wonder if the amount of goods derived from procreation by the parent exceeds the degree of suffering by the child, and if that’s the case, whether such relational goods could be used in an objection to antinatalism. However, this objection fails to consider that its justification of procreation might be the wrong type of reason for procreating. Not to mention it fails to consider the sheer degree of suffering put forward by Benatar. Just because an action produces overall maximum goodness, if it’s done for the wrong type of reason, say for the pleasure of some at the cost of the misfortune of others, then it remains impermissible. Consider a society that derives immense pleasure by psychologically and physically torturing babies. They are thrifty in their pursuits in that they only need one baby to be tortured to sustain their group pleasure as they stream the event far and wide for all to enjoy. In this case, baby torture is still wrong, even though it brings about more good than its absence, as is the same for procreation.

So, the procreationist turns back to the MA and DDA, continuing her search for an objection. Regarding the empirical data of pain and suffering resulting from procreation, there is little to argue against. The vast pain and suffering articulated in MA is evident. To deny it would be to deny the experiences of the millions of victims of genocide, democide, and persecution worldwide. That is without mentioning the day-to-day suffering which all the billions and billions of humans who have ever existed have experienced: thirst, toe-stubbing, cold, heat, sand-in-the-eye, migraines, joint pain. It has all been around since time immemorial and on an ever-increasing scale. So, pain and suffering exist, and yes, the situation is as bad as the antinatalist purports it to be. It seems that Justifying Goods are the only avenue that the procreationist can take to consistently maintain their beliefs.

If there is some justifying good such that we have neglected it in our evaluation of MA and DDA and that the benefits accrued to the procreated from it outweigh all aforementioned harms, and with respect to our various duties cause the evaluation thereof to be positive, then the previously considered arguments about procreations permissibility fail. When we talk about the ways in which we benefit with respect to
(4) in DDA we may not be accurately surveying the full range of types of goods that
the procreated experience during their lives. Perhaps some goods are of a higher order
than others. John Stuart Mill, a famous hedonist, argued this very point. He suggested
that animalistic pleasures were of an inferior quality to high-order pleasures that
exercised our high capacities. Under his view, the sheer volume of pleasure is not the
only important factor in comparing pleasures. According to Mill, the quality thereof is
equally important. Love, friendship, aesthetic creation and appreciation, and
relationships of faith and faithfulness are all good candidates for processes that create
or sustain higher order pleasure when compared to say pleasure derived from gustatory
or olfactory sensation. These are goods that individuals generally associate as being of
superior value to other lower-order pleasures. This could also be the case for other
theories of well-being like objective list and desire-fulfillment. There may be more
pertinent line items on the list with respect to our well-being. Just as there might be
more important desires like the desire for love and friendship as opposed to a desire
for a sandwich. Thus, the evaluation of (4) in DDA might be shrouded by an apparent
equality of goods which seems not to be the case. It should be explicitly noted that
procreationist’s objection to DDA will also extend as an objection to MA insofar as it
establishes a duty or set of duties that supersede our duty of non-maleficence.

Beauty, friendship, and love are all great goods. The artist devotes their life to aesthetic
creation and appreciation, often sacrificing their physical well-being at the cost of
producing something. However, being an artist is a decision that is made once
something has already come into existence. Not everyone is an artist. Many people do
devote significant portions of their time to aesthetic appreciation. However, it is only
the few and far between that would go through significant physical pain or suffering
to appreciate and create the beautiful. Friendship and love are a different story, they
reside at the zenith of meaning for many. Whether it be vicariously through a religion,
or through personal recognition, both types of relationships bear the utmost
importance. For the believers of Abrahamic religions, love thy neighbor or love for
your brother what you love for yourself is an, if not the, pertinent commandment from
God. Friendship and love, or relationships of faith and faithfulness are something the
average person regularly chooses or wishes to choose over pleasures and other goods.
Moreover, these same people are willing to experience pain and suffering to maintain
these relationships, to be good friends, and to love one another. This is the case of the
mother or father willing to do anything for their kids who works painstakingly long
hours of arduous work to create a better life for their children. Alternatively, the child
who does the same for their parent or partner. The expression: “would take a bullet
for” bears numerous representatives on both sides of its relation, because of these
types of relationships and this thing we call love.

Free will, if it exists, is another good candidate for being a justifying good. Without it,
we cannot speak in prescriptive terms about procreation. That is, no one would be
rightly told they ought or ought not procreate. However, we would still be able to refer
to the act as good or bad. On its face, free will seems to be very important. As mentioned, it allows us to talk about things we should and should not take part in. It gives us ownership over things we do and is essential for any discussion of intentional self-improvement. However, all those things could be true, and it could still not justify procreation. To reason through this question, we must consider three cases: our existence with suffering and free will, our existence with suffering and without free will, and non-existence. If non-existence is preferable to the two preceding cases, then being procreated is evidently worse than not existing. Whereas, if our existence with suffering and free will is preferable to non-existence, then, if we have free-will, procreation is permissible. Moreover, free will might not be essential to goods like friendship and love which we have established might be the types of goods could justify procreation. Thus, regardless of the antinatalists stance on free will, they have an argument to consider.

Turning away from free will, we might consider whether future generations of humans could be used as a reply to DDA. In many identifiable ways human quality of life has been improving, we have cures and treatments for diseases that once plagued our society, take polio for instance. If we consider humans progress to yield a net positive result in well-being from generation to generation. Wherein our quality of life improves somewhat consistently. Me might also justify procreation through the possible future lives of the many individuals who will experience life at its best in future generations when humans have mitigated against many of the current ails of society. In a sense, maybe we can appeal to the idea that future generations will have a positive harm-benefit analysis as a reason for procreations current permissibility. If we consider that future human lives might be better than ours now, to the extent that we benefit them to a great extent in creating the capacity for their future procreation, then our decisions to keep procreation going may be justified. This observation, if correct, limits the appeal of harm of existing overall as it opens the possibility of considering future human generations as well. However, we could very well make the case that human society tends toward a digress in well-being, meaning we would be making a better case for the harm of existing. Additionally, this approach also may fall victim to objection that suggests our reasons to procreate now are for the wrong reason, because we are deciding to procreate now for the sake of benefitting down the line.

Alternatively, we may regret the hedonism and desire-satisfaction theory all together. Instead, we might argue for a stoic approach. Diogenes of Laertius, among others have argued that what we typically consider as good and bad are in fact miscategorized and that the virtues and vices are what deserve moral consideration. He suggests that”

The virtues – prudence, justice, courage, moderation and the rest – are good. The opposites of these – foolishness, injustice and the rest – are bad. Everything which neither does benefit nor harms is neither of these: for instance, life, health, pleasure, beauty, strength, wealth, reputation,
noble birth, and their opposites, death, disease, pain, ugliness, weakness, poverty, low repute, ignoble birth and the like.\textsuperscript{\textdegree}

Thus, if we take this view, we might consider shifting the conversation to virtues and vices and whether we harm and benefit on that basis in procreation. At first glance, it would appear that virtues and vices are experienced and exemplified by all humans. However, the extent to which we exhibit either of these seems to be at least in some part determined by our parenting. So, we might consider parenting styles and abilities in our decision about procreating. Essentially, in this case, the procreationist would be tasked with demonstrating that people are generally virtuous. Whereas the antinatalist would be interested in how vicious people are, something which Benatar establishes strongly in the MA.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, the situation for the procreationist is not as grim as Benatar purports it to be. It is not the case that procreation is \textit{never} impermissible. It is possible that procreation is permissible. It is permissible, given that it brings about Justifying Goods that in the right amount supersede the bad entailed by being procreated. Love, friendship, and free-will are good candidates for being those Justifying Goods. If we have no free will, the procreationist can still employ love and friendship as Justifying Goods. Whereas, if we have free will, the procreationist has all three at their disposal. All seem like worthwhile and powerful candidates for \textit{justifying} procreation.


\textsuperscript{2} Ibid. Pp. 29

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid. Pp. 30

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid. Pp. 69

\textsuperscript{5} Ibid. Pp. 33

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid. Pp. 34

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. Pp. 34

