

Does the Lack of Cosmic Meaning Make Our Lives Bad?

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A notable feature of most of the arguments for anti-natalism is the prominence of welfarism (albeit not utilitarianism) in them.¹ That is, many of the rationales for deeming it normally impermissible to create new human children invoke a duty not to impose harm such as suffering on others, which those who have been created will invariably face. For example, David Benatar² and Christopher Belshaw³ maintain that we wrongfully treat those we create merely as means to an end because of the foreseeable harm we impose on them to pursue our reproductive goals; Seanna Shiffrin⁴ and Asheel Singh⁵ are sympathetic to the idea that it is wrong to impose harm on others without their consent, which new persons are not able to provide; and Gerald Harrison⁶ posits the existence of a Rossian *prima facie* duty not to cause harm, while noting the absence of such a duty to create beings that would experience benefits.

Interestingly, though, Benatar does not appeal solely to welfarist considerations when arguing for anti-natalism; sometimes he instead invokes the apparent bad of life's meaninglessness.⁷ It is one thing to reject procreation because "it is bad to endure pain, suffering, frustration, sadness, trauma, to be betrayed, discredited, and to die,"⁸ and it is another to do so because "once you believe this whole thing is ultimately pointless, it is ridiculous to generate more adversity-facing meaning-seekers."⁹ Notice the "ultimately" in this quotation; Benatar contends that, while our lives might be able to exhibit some terrestrial

or human meaning, that is not enough to make them worth creating, which would require an ultimate or cosmic meaning that is unavailable to us. A cosmic meaning for Benatar would involve transcending the limits of space and time, so that we could make a positive difference to the entire universe and do so forever, not just a small portion of the planet we are on for about 80 years if we are lucky.

In this article, I focus strictly on cosmic meaninglessness as a disvalue distinct from harm, and critically discuss Benatar's argument that, because our lives are invariably meaningless from a cosmic perspective, there is at least some moral reason not to create new human lives. As I discuss below, in the literature the principal response to this kind of argument has been that our lives can and sometimes do exhibit cosmic meaning. However, I pursue a different angle; I grant Benatar the claim that none of us will or even could exhibit cosmic meaningfulness (of the sort he deems important), while arguing mainly that this fact is insufficient to infer that our lives are bad or, more carefully, bad of a sort to provide moral reason to avoid procreation.

In the following I first spell out Benatar's meaning-based rationale for anti-natalism (section 1), taking care to specify what he means by "cosmic meaningfulness" and why he believes its absence renders our lives so unfortunate and regrettable as to support anti-natalism. Then, after pointing out why I believe that Benatar can rebut criticisms of this argument that are salient in the literature (section 2), I present two new objections that are meant to be stronger (section 3). In particular, I articulate and defend a principle by which to judge the absence of a good to be bad, roughly according to which the more unavailable a good is, the less reason there is to exhibit negative reactive attitudes toward its absence. It follows from this principle that there is no reason to regret or be sad about the lack of cosmic meaning, given that it is impossible for us. I conclude by briefly reflecting on the implications of the argumentation in this essay for welfare-based rationales for anti-natalism

(section 4), noting that it appears that, while the above principle provides reason to doubt Benatar's meaning-based rationale, it provides support for his welfarist Asymmetry Argument.

1 From Cosmic Meaninglessness to Anti-natalism

In this section I expound the meaning-based rationale for anti-natalism that Benatar has advanced for some 15 years, for the first time in 2006 and as recently as 2021.¹⁰ There are, as one would expect, some differences here and there in the ways that he has spelled it out. I focus on what I take to be the most prominent and also prima facie most defensible version in what follows. I do not evaluate the argument here, except insofar as I note some evidence that Benatar himself offers in support of his premises, saving that for the following sections.

There are three major meaning-based premises Benatar is committed to holding in logical support of the conclusion that one has some moral reason not to procreate. One is that the most important sort of meaning a life could have is a cosmic one. A second is that no human life can in fact exhibit a cosmic meaning. A third is that lacking the most important sort of meaning is bad for a life, indeed so bad as to provide some moral reason not to make a life that would lack it. From these premises, the anti-natalist conclusion would follow, supposing they were true. Let us consider each in turn.

The most common way that Benatar analyzes the concept of meaning in life is in terms of transcending limits,¹¹ an analysis that Robert Nozick is well known for having first advanced with care,¹² but that others beyond Benatar have also found attractive.¹³ The idea is that a life is more meaningful, as opposed to say, happy, the more it "transcends one's own limits and significantly impacts others or serves purposes beyond oneself."¹⁴ According to Benatar, many (although not all) human lives are able to transcend limits that separate them from other human beings or human goods. Many of us can develop romantic attachments,

rear children with love, contribute to charity, share knowledge, and make similarly terrestrial accomplishments.

Benatar does not deny that these are genuine sources of meaning, but he maintains that they are so merely from a human standpoint. There is, for him, another relevant standpoint by which to make judgments of meaningfulness, namely, the point of view of the universe. To have meaning from the perspective of the universe would include (indeed, by definition, for Benatar) significantly impacting others throughout the cosmos or serving purposes that range over it.¹⁵

What might cosmic meaning look like? One possibility involves God as characteristically conceived in monotheist religious traditions, viz., as having created the universe with a plan in mind. Although Benatar is unclear precisely how interacting with God might confer cosmic meaning, he appears to think that, if God existed, cosmic meaning in our lives might be on offer.¹⁶ A second possibility does not involve a spiritual creator, but instead more limited, embodied aliens. Here is what I find to be Benatar's most explicit comment on what cosmic meaning would amount to: "I can tell you what it would take for our lives to have cosmic meaning. Part of what it would take is for there to be an extra-terrestrial population and for our lives to have significance from their perspective."¹⁷ For us to have significance from their perspective would centrally involve having some positive effect on their lives.

Cosmic meaning is not optional in respect of a good life, for Benatar. One could not obtain enough (let alone maximize) meaning in one's life, if one remained within the human standpoint. Instead, cosmic meaning is said to be a "quite important" and even "the ultimate" form of meaning, where the more (kinds of) meaning the better.¹⁸ Benatar believes that these claims are true largely because of the way he conceives of meaningfulness fundamentally in terms of transcending limits. From any limited perspective, one can always stand back and

ask what the point of it is. I undergo some labor in exchange for a wage. Why? To support a family. But what difference does it make to have a family? Perhaps my child will have some political influence, helping to liberate a people from oppression. What is the point of that? Maybe the people will then be in a position to share its culture with the rest of the world. Why does that matter? And so on. One can continue to pose queries about the meaningfulness of more limited perspectives, so that one ideally would transcend all limits to the point of extending throughout the cosmos in all places and in all (future) times.

Some transcendence or relational theorists hold that a limited condition can be meaningful only if (and because) it is appropriately linked to what is unlimited,¹⁹ but, so far as I can see, Benatar does not suggest that.²⁰ All he needs is the claim that making larger spatial and longer temporal positive differences to persons confers a (quantitatively or qualitatively) much greater meaning on one's life (without the greater meaning being a necessary condition for the lesser to obtain).

Unfortunately for us, according to Benatar, none of our lives exhibits cosmic meaning. "Earthly life is thus without significance, import, or purpose beyond our planet. It is meaningless from the cosmic perspective."²¹ Indeed, more strongly, for all we can tell, none of our lives *could* exhibit such a meaning. Benatar contends that cosmic meaning is "impossible to attain"²² and that from the point of view of the universe our lives are "irredeemably meaningless."²³ Benatar is even open to the idea that "no conceivable alternative circumstances could have made things otherwise."²⁴ On the one hand, it appears that a spiritual creator does not exist (and that, even if one did exist, there are puzzles about how it might make our lives more meaningful). On the other hand, it appears that the universe is devoid of other physical life, and that, even if it is teeming elsewhere beyond our detection, we can never be in a position to influence it, let alone for the better and forever. "Nothing we do on earth has any effect beyond it. The evolution of life, including human life,

is a product of blind forces and serves no apparent purpose. We exist now, but we will not exist for long....(N)othing we do makes any difference beyond our planet or in cosmic time.”²⁵

Having maintained that cosmic meaning is an important sort and that it is utterly beyond our reach, Benatar further claims that this renders our lives bad in a certain respect. Although he does not in fact often use the word “bad” to describe cosmically meaningless lives, Benatar does explicitly describe the absence of cosmic meaning as a “cost”²⁶ and routinely says that lives bearing such a cost warrant the following reactions: the judgment that our lives are unfortunate²⁷; an attitude of regret about them²⁸; and the emotion of sadness.²⁹ That sounds bad. In addition, Benatar explicitly maintains that the absence of cosmic meaningfulness provides at least some reason to avoid creating new human lives—recall the quotation from the introduction that “once you believe this whole thing is ultimately pointless, it is ridiculous to generate more adversity-facing meaning-seekers.”³⁰

Despite this quotation, it is rare for Benatar to suggest that cosmic meaninglessness itself provides sufficient or conclusive reason to avoid procreating. Normally, he appeals to the absence of cosmic meaning combined with the presence of harm to draw that conclusion, as when he says, “Sandwiched between birth and death is a struggle for meaning and a desperate attempt to ward off life’s suffering. This is why a pessimistic view about the human condition leads to the anti-natalist conclusion that we ought not to procreate.”³¹ Even so, it is robust and interesting to maintain that the absence of cosmic meaning provides some, contributory moral reason not to create new human lives.

Although Benatar believes that cosmic meaninglessness provides some reason to avoid procreation, he interestingly denies that it provides any reason for us to commit suicide (let alone to kill others), for two major reasons.³² For one, killing oneself (or others) would not impart any cosmic meaning; suicide would not do any good in respect of redeeming that

cost, even if it could end the prospect of net harm in some cases. For another, there is plausibly a difference between a life's being good enough to start and a life's being good enough to continue once having begun; our standards are plausibly lower in the latter case.

So far, I have merely expounded the rationale for anti-natalism from Benatar that appeals to cosmic meaning. Bringing together the key pieces, the argument in a nutshell is that eternally influencing other persons in positive ways throughout the spatio-temporal universe is an important kind of meaning and that no human life can exhibit such a meaning, which, in turn, is an unfortunate, regrettable, and sad cost that we ought not to impose on anyone by creating a new human life. It is now time to evaluate this argument.

2 Extant Objections and Their Weaknesses

In the literature one encounters three major objections to premises of Benatar's argument, ones that I believe fail to hit the mark. In this section, I quickly recount them and point out how Benatar can neatly sidestep these arrows, giving us reason, in the following section, to consider whether other, fresh objections might reach their target.

The most common reply to the claim that our lives lack meaning from the perspective of the universe is to hold that some in fact have it. According to some philosophers, a number of us have pleased God by helping to advance God's plan for the universe.³³ According to others, we are the sole (or extremely rare) beings with a superlative non-instrumental value, a dignity.³⁴ According to still others, we sometimes create objective goods or act in impartial ways that could be appreciated from any standpoint.³⁵

The problem with these rationales is that, either they invoke what Benatar means by "meaning from the point of view of the universe" but are unjustified, or they are justified but do not invoke what Benatar means by the phrase. The appeal to God is an example of the former. As noted in the previous section, Benatar is open to the idea that God might in

principle be a source of a cosmic meaning, but the problem for him, for me, and for many others is that the evidence for God's existence is weak. If anything, there is probably greater evidence against God's existence.

There is, in contrast, comparatively strong evidence that we have a dignity and that we can produce objective goods or act in impartial ways that members of other intelligent species could appreciate. However, these considerations are irrelevant, given what Benatar means by the phrase "meaning from the point of view of the universe." Recall that this phrase connotes significantly impacting others throughout the cosmos or serving purposes that range over it.³⁶ For Benatar, there is no logical gap between the point of view of the universe and doing what causally affects other beings in it in positive ways. Hence, pointing to aspects of our lives that have nothing to do with influencing beings beyond the earth casts no doubt on Benatar's premise that our lives unavoidably lack cosmic meaning.

A second objection in the literature to Benatar's argument is from Iddo Landau, who argues, in effect, that existing limits are not worth transcending. He notes that "almost all of the cosmos, being nothing more than an enormous quantity of utterly dead matter, seems to me to be completely irrelevant to the meaning of my life."³⁷ There is no point to engaging with asteroids light-years away. Relatedly, if asteroids light-years away did not exist, there would also be no loss of meaning. Landau remarks that "if everything else in the cosmos became a million times smaller while Earth and its inhabitants remained the same size, I would not feel that my life had therefore become a million times more meaningful, or in fact any more meaningful at all."³⁸ We need not transcend the limits available to us in order to have meaningful life, so Landau is arguing.

In reply, Benatar can plausibly point out that Landau is working with a notion of transcending limits that is not what he (Benatar) is using. Landau's argumentation supposes that Benatar holds the view that our lives are more meaningful the more they transcend

whatever limits happen to exist. However, Benatar is more charitably read as holding that our lives are more meaningful the more there are limits between us and valuable beings and the more we transcend such limits. Benatar believes that important meaning would be constituted by forever engaging with live persons throughout the universe, who unfortunately do not exist (or are unreachable), and not by interacting with dead matter, which clearly does exist.

A third objection involves the tempting idea that since cosmic meaninglessness is the *absence of a good*, it is *not bad* and hence does not normally warrant negative reactive attitudes such as regret, sadness, dismay, or the like.³⁹ The suggestion is that bads are well represented with a negative number and merit negative reactions such as hatred and sadness, while goods are well represented with a positive number and merit positive reactions such as love and gladness. The absence of good is the mere reduction of a positive number, and the elimination of all good (and all bad) amounts to a zero, where these conditions merit either neutral non-reaction or indifference between a negative and positive reaction.

Despite the attractiveness of the simplicity of this schema, it is too simple. As Benatar plausibly points out in many of his writings, deprivation of a good can itself be bad, or, if not that, at least a cost that merits negative reactive attitudes such as sadness, disappointment, hatred, and the like. For example, when I have had a good such as a family or job and I am then deprived of it, it is surely described as “regrettable” or a “cause for sadness.” Hence, for all that has been said so far, the absence of cosmic meaning might call for similar descriptions.

3 Why Cosmic Meaninglessness Provides No Reason to Avoid Procreation

In this section, I accept Benatar’s point that, for all we can tell, nothing we can do will benefit or otherwise positively influence anything valuable beyond the earth; our lives cannot exhibit his notion of cosmic meaning, which, as we have seen, centrally involves interacting

positively with either God or extraterrestrial populations, neither of which is possible (for all we can tell). What I do here is to cast doubt on the ideas that cosmic meaning is all that important and that its absence merits negative reactive attitudes supporting the choice not to create human lives that would in every case lack such meaning.

In the following I first put pressure on the idea that cosmic meaning is all that important a good, which will involve taking the time to reflect precisely on whether meeting aliens from afar might be considered a higher source of meaning. Then, granting for the sake of argument that it would be, I deny that the relevant way in which this good is absent counts as a “cost” or is otherwise so bad such as to support anti-natalism.

3.1 How Good Would Cosmic Meaning Be?

I am sympathetic to the claim that some real meaning would come from interacting with, and especially meeting, intelligent alien life. I have been moved by films such as *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *E.T.*, *Contact*, and *Arrival*, where my emotional reactions are, I think, tracking a sense of significance, as opposed to some other value such as happiness, moral virtue, or beauty.

However, I have wept no more intensely at these kinds of movies than I have at other ones. Films about establishing a romantic connection (between humans) in the face of obstacles and about protagonists struggling to overcome and make something of their lives have also affected me, and in comparable, if not stronger, ways. If the reader’s emotions are similar to mine, that is evidence that they believe that meeting smart extraterrestrials would matter, but to no more a degree than certain human engagements.

There is some additional prima facie evidence that substantial meaning would come from interacting with intelligent alien life, namely, in that it seems appropriate for governments to spend some tax money searching for evidence of it. Concretely, I, for one,

believe that it has been right for the United States to spend public resources on The Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project.⁴⁰ The hope has been to detect not just communication from an extraterrestrial source, but also a signal to which we could respond. The idea that spending taxes for such aims is apt is probably best justified by the propositions that government ought to foster meaning in people's lives⁴¹ and that interacting with self-conscious beings elsewhere in the cosmos would be pretty meaningful. It would not just be the science and technology that aliens might be able to share with us, for I submit that the government should spend some resources to make contact with intelligent life, even if this species were about as advanced as we are, or even if it were much more advanced than us but we were unable to benefit from its knowledge for whatever reason (say, because we are too dumb).

However, I do not think that finding evidence of intelligent alien life is so quantitatively or qualitatively more important as to mean that the SETI project should receive the *lion's share* of a government's budget. And I presume the reader agrees with me. If so, then we have some reason to doubt the claim that meeting alien persons would confer a *much* greater meaning on our lives than human projects, a claim to which Benatar is committed by virtue of holding (as discussed in section 2) that cosmic meaning is the ultimate sort and required to make procreation justified and that cosmic meaning would involve transcending limits to engage positively with an extraterrestrial population.

In reply, Benatar could point out that our chances of detecting the right signal are low, where expected value is what drives much public policy, not value alone. The point is fair. It is true that many of us would deem it appropriate for a government to spend more supposing the chances of finding intelligent life were much higher. If a clear message had been received from the cosmos, substantial public (and also private) funds would come flooding in.

However, even in that scenario, states should not spend so much as to ruin the security, nutrition, and healthcare of human beings. Very few would judge it appropriate to let food supplies and medical systems utterly collapse, causing serious harm to billions of humans, if that were necessary to do all we could to connect with aliens. The best explanation of that judgment is that interacting with alien persons would matter, but not to a dramatically higher degree than looking after humans.

Some might remain tempted by the prospect of technological gain; perhaps aliens would provide us with machines that we could not have developed on our own, so that making extreme sacrifices in the short-term to contact them would be justified. However, then it would not be the contact with aliens that would be meaningful, but rather the expected effects on humanity; this reply does not support a conclusion about the higher importance of cosmic meaning. A *prima facie* stronger reply on Benatar's behalf is therefore that a government would have a *moral* obligation to meet the needs of human beings, a value that is distinct from *meaning*. If we stay focused on meaning, a need for the cosmic sort looms large, so Benatar might suggest.

However, the reasonable response to this point is that many of us would consider the failure by a government to live up to that obligation to be a failure to foster as much meaning as it could have among human lives. A government is not required to save lives as such, that is, including lives that are not worth living. Instead, it is obligated to save lives and more generally meet people's urgent needs in the expectation that they are going to have lives worth living.

Consider, now, which kinds of personal sacrifices you would make in order to interact with alien persons. Would you ditch your spouse and children in order to join the crew of a starship with warp drive in hot pursuit of a (much) more attractive instance of E.T.? Some readers would, but relatively few, suggesting that, for most, meaningful ties with humans

count for more. In addition, of those who would leave their families behind, for many of them it would be a very difficult decision, suggesting that meaningful ties with humans and those with aliens are of comparable importance.

Previous replies on Benatar's behalf are natural to make here. Perhaps it is moral obligation to family, not meaning, that would aptly keep us here grounded on earth, and maybe the chance of truly bonding with aliens would be low. However, previous responses to these replies are also natural to make. Violating a moral obligation to family is precisely what would reduce meaning, both in their lives and yours. In addition, suppose for the sake of argument that one could develop intimate ties with an alien person. Would the prospect of romance with one who lives across the galaxy really matter so much more than with one's spouse on earth?

I submit that these reflections indicate that while many of us would find substantial meaning in relating to intelligent aliens, that sort of meaning would not overshadow the sort available on earth. Upon comparing the human point of view with the point of view of the universe, many favor the former, or at least find the two of similar importance in respect of the spatial dimension of cosmic meaning. (I have admittedly not given the temporal dimension a fair shake, something it has already received in the literature under the heading of debate about "immortality.") The difference we can make to humans matters an awful lot, and for quite a few readers would matter more than the difference we could make to faraway aliens.

As a final reply on Benatar's behalf, one might note that he often draws a distinction between two types of meaning, subjective and objective. Perhaps the intuitions I have invoked here are evidence merely of what people subjectively find meaningful, not what is meaningful apart from people's propositional attitudes.

However, this reply would undercut much of Benatar's own argumentation in respect of objective meaning. He, too, appeals to intuitions about kinds and degrees of objective meaningfulness, and rightly so; it is standard in the field to take intuitions that are widely shared among philosophers' minds to be revealing of mind-independent facts of the matter.

3.2 How Bad Is Cosmic Meaning's Absence?

Suppose that the reader of the previous sub-section has had intuitions different from mine or has drawn implications from them different from the ones I have. Let us grant such a reader and Benatar the claim that cosmic meaning would be a "quite important" and "ultimate" sort of meaning, one that would in some sense be greater than what is available to an earthly life. Even so, I argue here that its absence would not make a human life bad or a cost that is so unfortunate, regrettable, and sad as to provide reason to avoid procreation.

As I indicated above, Benatar maintains that it can be reasonable to exhibit negative reactive attitudes towards goods that are impossible for us to have. There have been some others who have expressed a similar view, most recently Rivka Weinberg when she says, "When the impossible would be great for us, and when its absence leaves us lacking something it makes sense for us to want, then it is fitting for us to be sad and disappointed."⁴² I disagree, and strive to provide argumentation for my view that is new and compelling. Specifically, I articulate a principle meant to govern the reasonableness of negative reactions towards absent goods, which entails that impossible goods do not merit them, or at the very least not strong ones, and I defend the principle by appeal to intuition.

The principle is this: the more likely one would have had a good, the more reason there is for negative reactive attitudes to its absence and the judgment that its absence is unfortunate, whereas the less likely one would have had a good, the less reason there is for such reactions to its absence. Alternately, the closer the world in which one could access a

benefit, the more reasonable are emotions such as sadness and disappointment when one does not have it, whereas the farther the world in which one could access a benefit, the less reasonable are such emotions.

There are differences between these formulations, I realize, e.g., perhaps the actual world is in some sense unlikely. However, I leave it to those with better training in metaphysics than I have to sort them out and to be even more careful about which (or some close relative) is best. Either one will serve the function of giving us reason to doubt a key premise of Benatar's argument, and so for now I treat them as equivalent.

This principle does a good job of capturing what I expect will be readers' intuitions about how they would feel, and judge themselves reasonable to feel, in the following situations:

- (1) You purchased the winning lottery ticket and put in your pocket, but then forgot about it and washed your clothes, destroying the ticket.
- (2) Had you gone to the shop next door to you that you frequent to buy a lottery ticket, you would have purchased the winning ticket and claimed the prize.
- (3) Had you gone to a shop an hour's drive away that you had never visited before to buy a lottery ticket, you would have purchased the winning ticket and claimed the prize.
- (4) Had you purchased a lottery ticket, it would not have won because it was for a date that had already passed and there was no prize to claim.
- (5) There has never been a lottery system and there are no plans to set one up.

I presume that readers would be most upset, and very much so, about not having won the lottery in (1). In (1) you actually have the good of the winning ticket, and are then deprived of it. In (2), you do not actually have the good, but could easily have acquired it, and here I presume you would be upset but somewhat less so than in (1). I take it you would be even less upset in (3), and then either minimally upset or not at all in (4). Finally, I suggest you

would not be upset, or at least even less so, about not having won the lottery in (5). If that is what you would feel in these various scenarios, or, more carefully, if you would deem yourself sensible to feel these ways in them, then you have strong reason to accept the above principle, that the greater the odds were of you obtaining a good, or the closer the world in which you obtained it, the greater reason you have to exhibit negative reactive attitudes about not having obtained it.

Now, applying this principle to the putatively high good of cosmic meaning, it entails that one has no (or at least very little) reason to regret, be sad about, or be disappointed by its absence, supposing it is indeed impossible for us to attain. If there is no God and there are no aliens, or if they exist but we cannot relate to them in the right ways, then, while certain goods would be missing from our lives, it would not be a bad thing, at least not a cost of a sort that should lead us to avoid creating new lives.

There are of course different types of impossibility, and it could be that some impossible worlds, say, physically impossible ones, are nonetheless more near to us in some sense (or perhaps less unlikely) than are others, such as metaphysically or logically impossible ones. If so, one might reply on behalf of Benatar, Weinberg, and those with similar views that *some* negative reactions would be apt in respect of physically impossible worlds.

However, even if that were true, the reactions would be extremely slight, and—this is the key point—surely insufficiently strong as to warrant an anti-natalist orientation. Anti-natalism would most clearly be motivated by reactions of the sort that are apt for (1), not those appropriate for (5) (or for even more remote states of affairs), whatever those reactions might plausibly be.

Another sort of reply involves looking for counterexamples to the above principle. In particular, the principle appears to entail that one ought not to deem it unfortunate when

people die or to feel sadness when they do. If it is impossible for us to live forever, then, even if it would be better for us to enjoy eternal life, the present principle entails that it is not bad if we do not, an implication one might doubt.

What to think about the case of death is not straightforward. First off, many of us are clearly *more* upset when people die young than when they have had good lives and die old. Insofar as such reactions are reasonable, it is some evidence in support of my principle. Second, it is likely the case that what is often called “considerable life extension” is not merely possible, but also soon to be available to us. Human bodies can likely last longer than they have up to now, and, then, our selves, understood as certain minds, are probably capable of outliving our human bodies for many hundreds of years (say, upon being placed in synthetic bodies). Hence, when we mourn people who have died, it might be appropriate because they could have lived well for many hundreds, if not thousands, more years, not because they failed to enjoy eternal life. Third, readers should remember that the jury remains out on whether a *desirable* immortality is even possible for us. In particular, concerns about unavoidable repetitiveness—and furthermore a forgetful one that is probably requisite for us to avoid boredom—provide *prima facie* reason to welcome the end of our lives at some point.⁴³ If immortality could not be good for us, then its absence would not be bad and hence something to mourn.

If, despite these responses, some readers find the death case to be a compelling counterexample to my principle, then the question becomes whether they should change their minds about the lottery case. I find that a tough bullet to bite, and so suspect that the next step would instead be to consider whether there is a relevant difference between the impossibility of winning the lottery and the impossibility of us living well forever, such that the proposed principle should not be rejected but rather revised in some way. And then we would need to

see what the revised principle entails in respect of the absence of cosmic meaning, or at least its spatial dimension.

In sum, there are different ways in which cosmic meaning could be absent, and, insofar as it is absent from our lives due to impossibility, we are unreasonable to deem its absence to be a cost that renders our lives unfortunate, regrettable, and sad and hence to provide reason to avoid creating them. To question this objection seems to require one to attest sincerely that one would have the same reactions to (1) and (5), or, more carefully, that one thinks one would be reasonable to have the same reactions toward them. I look forward to seeing whether Benatar or others are inclined to go this route, or whether they can find a promising strategy, which I currently cannot see, for accepting differential reactions to (1) and (5) but rejecting the sort of principle that I have argued best justifies them.

4 Conclusion

To close this article, I relate the argumentation in it, which has been about a meaning-based rationale for anti-natalism, to the welfarist rationales for anti-natalism that Benatar and others have advanced. The first thing to notice is that my criticisms of the appeal to cosmic meaninglessness as a reason to avoid procreation do not apply to the central aspects of the welfarist rationales. The latter normally do not maintain that, because we are missing out on, say, infinite amounts of pleasure, our lives are unfortunate, regrettable, and sad. Although there are some occasions when Benatar does argue this way, usually he and all the other salient contemporary anti-natalists point to the suffering, injury, indignity, and other undesirable facets of a plain old human life. For all I have said in this article, they might be right that the benefits (or other moral considerations) simply are not enough to make our lives worth starting in the face of the harms.

Famously, Benatar has argued that none of a life's benefits can outweigh the harms. According to the interesting and influential "Asymmetry Argument," there is a difference in the way that benefits and harms of existence are to be valued in comparison to non-existence. On the one hand, it can surely be good to avoid harms by not bringing into existence a person who would have faced them had he existed. On the other, it is never bad for someone not to receive benefits by virtue of not having been brought into existence, since there is no person to be deprived of them. Hence, it follows that the benefits of being alive are not real advantages compared to not having been born, whereas the harms of being alive are real disadvantages compared to that.

I note that the Asymmetry Argument provides some reason for Benatar to accept the principle I have advanced about when to consider the absence of a good to be an unfortunate cost. A core premise of the Asymmetry Argument is that it is not bad that someone who is never brought into existence does not experience benefits. One way to defend that premise is with my principle, which roughly entails that the absence of a good is not bad when it was impossible for the good to obtain. Benatar defends the premise with the narrow claim that the absence of a good is not bad when a person *who could have had the good is not created*. However, it could also be that the absence of a good is not bad when a person *is created who could not have had the good*. In both cases, the impossibility of a person benefiting is more or less what is involved.

My principle fits neatly with the Asymmetry Argument, and it also accounts best for intuitions about when a good, such as a winning lottery ticket, that is absent counts as an unfortunate cost and merits reactions of regret and sadness (3.2 above). In closing, I therefore suspect that Benatar should let go of his cosmic meaningless rationale for anti-natalism, but feel upbeat about new resources to defend his fascinating, original welfarist rationale for it.⁴⁴

Notes

¹ As I initially noted in Thaddeus Metz, “Contemporary Anti-Natalism, Featuring Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been*,” *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (2012): 1-9.

² David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³ Christopher Belshaw, “A New Argument for Anti-natalism,” *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31, No 1 (2012): 117-127.

⁴ Seanna Shiffrin, “Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm,” *Legal Theory*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (1999): 117-148.

⁵ Asheel Singh, “Furthering the Case for Anti-natalism: Seanna Shiffrin and the Limits of Permissible Harm,” *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31, No 1 (2012): 104-116.

⁶ Gerald Harrison, “Antinatalism, Asymmetry, and an Ethic of *Prima Facie* Duties,” *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31, No 1 (2012): 94-103. Cf. David Benatar, “Anti-natalism,” in David Benatar and David Wasserman, *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015): 11-147.

⁷ See Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, pp. 81-86, 199; Benatar, “Anti-natalism,” pp. 56-57; Benatar, *The Human Predicament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. xi-xii, 27-63, 123, 207-208; and Benatar, “The Meaning of Life” and “Postscript 1: David Benatar’s Response to Thaddeus Metz,” in Mark Oppenheimer and Jason Werbeloff, eds, *Conversations about the Meaning of Life* (Johannesburg: Obsidian Worlds Publishing, 2021): pp. 1-38, 76-82.

⁸ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 127.

⁹ Benatar, “The Meaning of Life,” op. cit., p. 19.

¹⁰ Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit., pp. 81-86, 199; and Benatar, “The Meaning of Life,” op. cit.

¹¹ Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit., p. 83; Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 18, 54; and Benatar, “The Meaning of Life,” op. cit., pp. 7-8, 30.

¹² Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981): pp. 594-612.

¹³ E.g., Guy Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Religious Experience* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014); and Nicholas Waghorn, *Nothingness and the Meaning of Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

¹⁴ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 18.

¹⁵ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 23, 33, 35-36, 63; Benatar, “The Meaning of Life,” op. cit., pp. 12-13, 15.

¹⁶ Benatar, “The Meaning of Life,” op. cit., pp. 32-33.

¹⁷ Benatar, “The Meaning of Life,” op. cit., p. 15. See also *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

¹⁸ Benatar, “The Meaning of Life,” op. cit., pp. 5, 7, 24.

¹⁹ E.g., Nozick, op. cit., pp. 599-608; and Bennett-Hunter, op. cit.

²⁰ And it is a claim I have argued elsewhere is dubious, e.g., in Thaddeus Metz, “Is Life’s Meaning Ultimately Unthinkable?” *Philosophia*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (2016): 1247-1256.

²¹ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 36.

²² Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been*, op. cit., p. 82.

²³ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 60 and 62.

²⁴ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 60.

²⁵ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 36, 50.

²⁶ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., p. 123.

²⁷ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 64, 83; Benatar, “Postscript 1,” op. cit., p. 77.

²⁸ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, op. cit., pp. 53, 59, 60, 63.

²⁹ Benatar, “Postscript 1,” *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79. For broadly similar approaches in respect of when it is appropriate to exhibit negative reactive attitudes, see Clifford Williams, *Religion and the Meaning of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): pp. 108-111; and Rivka Weinberg, “Ultimate Meaning: We Don’t Have It, We Can’t Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad,” *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2021): 1-22.

³⁰ See also the citations in note 7 to additional places where Benatar concludes that there is some reason to favor anti-natalism because of the absence of cosmic meaning.

³¹ Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

³² Benatar, *The Human Predicament*, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-196, 201-202, 208.

³³ Philip Quinn, “How Christianity Secures Life’s Meanings,” in Joseph Runzo and Nancy Martin, eds, *The Meaning of Life in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications: 2000), 53-68, pp. 55-56; Williams, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Guy Kahane, “Our Cosmic Insignificance,” *Noûs*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2014): 745-772.

³⁵ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd Ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993): pp. 333-334; Susan Wolf, “Meaningfulness: A Third Dimension of the Good Life,” *Foundations of Science*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2016): 253-269, pp. 261-262; Iddo Landau, *Finding Meaning in an Imperfect World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017): pp. 95-98; Brooke Alan Trisel, “How Human Life Matters in the Universe,” *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2019): 1-15.

³⁶ See note 15 for citations.

³⁷ Landau, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-99. A somewhat similar, albeit more tersely stated, point is made by Guy Kahane when he rhetorically asks, “Is the idea supposed to be that to be cosmically significant, we need to be moving galaxies around?” in *op. cit.*, p. 760. For Benatar’s answer to Kahane, see *The Human Predicament*, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

³⁸ Landau, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

³⁹ Aribiah Attoe, *An Inquiry into African Conceptions of the Meaning of Life*. PhD Thesis, University of Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10210/410813> (2019): pp. 162-179.

⁴⁰ National Aeronautics and Space Administration, “SETI: The Search for ExtraTerrestrial Intelligence,” <https://history.nasa.gov/seti.html>.

⁴¹ Defended in Thaddeus Metz, “Meaning in Life as the Right Metric,” *Society*, Vol. 53, No. 2 (2016): 294-296.

⁴² Weinberg, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁴³ For just two discussions, see David Blumenfeld, “Living Life over Again,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (2009): 357-386; and Todd May, *Death* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2009): pp. 46-47, 64-65, 71.

⁴⁴ For comments on a prior draft, I thank Oliver Hallich, Michael Hauskeller, Kirk Lougheed, and Rivka Weinberg. I have also benefited from discussions with David Benatar over the years, our first engagement having taken place in Cape Town back in 1999. Congratulations to him on this special issue of the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, surely a source of some (terrestrial) meaning.