Answering Silenus: Three Perspectives on David Benatar's Compassionate Anti-Natalism

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> "An old legend has it that King Midas hunted a long time in the woods for the wise Silenus…. When he had finally caught him, the king asked him what he considered man's greatest good…. 'Ephemeral wretch, begotten by accident and toil, why do you force me to tell you what it would be your greatest boon not to hear? What would be best for you is quite beyond your reach: not to have been born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*.'"—Friedrich Nietzsche[1]

> "In a man's attachment to life there is something stronger than all the ills in the world."—Albert Camus[2]

THE PHILOSOPHY OF PESSIMISM is an age-old mode of thinking, with eloquent champions from almost every period of human history. This long-standing, if not especially popular, school of thought might be glossed as offering "dismal predictions about what nearly all of us can expect to experience in our private lives and interpersonal relationships, about the welfare of our fellow creatures, about the character of our social institutions and global politics, and about our prospects for progress on these matters in the future."[3] A pessimist need not deny—though *the most pessimistic* pessimists sometimes do—that wondrous goodness and joy do manifest in our world; nor that a human life might be, during some interludes, "happy"; nor that political and social institutions might occasionally function effectively and virtuously. To meet the minimal standard for counting as a philosophical pessimist, a human soul must "merely" take the stance that, in our "scorched and inhospitable world,"[4] such goods are invariably gravely threatened, and commonly overwhelmed, by "very serious bads."

In his book *Fallenness and Flourishing*, the philosopher Hud Hudson endorses pessimism (so understood) and takes it to be a philosophical position that is "seriously underrepresented and underappreciated."[5] He writes:

> [T]he philosophy of pessimism is well grounded…. The collective evidence for this view drawn from the plight of animals, the natural dispositions of human persons, our checkered history of social and political institutions, the world's religions and wisdom traditions, and humanity's achievements in art, literature, music, and philosophy is clear and compelling…. [W]e live [no matter what era of human history "we" happen to inhabit] in an exceedingly rough neighborhood and in very trying times.[6]

Ultimately, Hudson calls himself an "optimistic pessimist." His deep-running pessimism about this vale of tears is couched within a broader Christian worldview that qualifies his grim mindset. Hudson's Christian faith also grounds his practical advice about how best—despite our "feeble powers" and "paltry resources"[7]—to live with hope and to persist in life-affirming social and moral pursuits within the "rough neighborhoods" we inhabit.

The South African philosopher David Benatar, whose sensibility, basic assumptions, and arguments are the central focus of this *Zeal* forum, is certainly among the most pessimistic pessimists. Notably, he does Hudson's dismal predictions at least three better.

First, Benatar is a "universalist." Whereas Hudson speaks of the "precious few who flourish" in a world "shot through with all sorts of disvalue,"[8] Benatar's stance is that each and every human life is, all things considered, a very serious bad for the person who lives it. Otherwise put, Benatar categorically forecloses the possibility you and I might experience a good life. Hudson doesn't.

Second, Hudson often speaks of "genuine goods for embodied, intellectual creatures like ourselves": "the deeply satisfying commitments and rewards of spiritual life, the richness, profundity, and fulfillment afforded by art, literature, music, and philosophy…all goods, without question."[9] Hudson's pessimism consequently has a deeply tragic element: How can such a wondrous world—with its great "plurality of *sui generis* goods"[10]—at once yield so much wretchedness? In contrast, Benatar judges each human life from the perspective of a more crimped and constricted theory of value, invariably treating the question whether a human life is all-things-considered good or bad as best determined by means of a hedonic calculus: Does a human life include, over its course, more pleasure or more pain and suffering? For Benatar, there is, it seems, no good beyond "pleasure and the absence of pain."[11] If we were to take life's *very best* offerings to be so meager, would human existence strike any of us as tragic? No, and so perhaps it's only "logical" that Benatar's highly analytical, emotion-free prose is bereft of the existentialist's characteristic heartbreak.

Third, in juxtaposition to Hudson's hope-tinged, theologically grounded optimism, the only "hope" Benatar expresses is that his especially bleak worldview happens, despite all of his arguments, to be mistaken: that his hedonic calculations are off, or that people's self-reported "happiness" is not, as he frequently argues, a bias-induced illusion. That said, Benatar is pretty darn sure he isn't mistaken—so certain that, as one commentator puts it, he "dismisses" theological ideas and the very possibility of human life having objective meaning "with all the standard arguments of the best dorm-room philosophers."[12] Unlike Hudson, Benatar doesn't really bother, in other words, to seriously engage with competing comprehensive doctrines.

So, if we were to grant that philosophical pessimism is true, how then ought we to live? As I've intimated, Benatar's prescription isn't to open ourselves up to the possibility of reasons for optimism, theologically grounded or otherwise. And his calm, quietly resigned mood clearly doesn't channel the spirit of Camus' absurd hero, who rousingly calls for us to heroically fight on against our utterly meaningless and unhappy fate. Instead, Benatar's dominant practical directive is that we should adopt "compassionate anti-natalism": the view that bearing children is, on the grounds of benevolence, morally forbidden. It would have been best if the human project had never begun. With that bilious, bitter water already under the bridge, we had better not inflict life's relentless dissatisfaction upon any new "existers."[13]

As Kenton Engel has argued, any sustained, world-wide project to put Benatar's moral prescription into action—to wind down the human experiment—would create unspeakable and incalculable misery, and the least advantaged among us would likely bear the most immediate, the most excruciating, and the lengthiest bouts of suffering.[14] Set aside, though, this important moral appeal (to benevolence and equality) to consider this question: Would Benatar endorse the option of ending humanity, in the blink of an eye, if he could do so with a simple snap of his fingers?

Over the course of the past twenty-five years, Benatar has taught his own special brand of wisdom and its moral implications, most notably in his 2006 book *Better Never to Have Been*.[15] Benatar's work has prompted, in fits and spurts, bursts of retorts and rebuttals and re-thinks—in scholarly circles, in the blogosphere, and recently in the *New Yorker*.[16]

This history of commentary on Benatar's life-denying worldview raises a question. Does our world need more? This *Zeal* forum says "yes" to more, but it takes its own unique tack. While I was reading *Better Never to Have Been*, a question popped into my mind: "What would Nietzsche say about anti-natalism?" In boisterously insulting language, Nietzsche

famously decries any "nay-saying" philosophy. It's hard to imagine a philosopher who asserts a stronger "no" to Nietzsche's doctrine of eternal recurrence than Benatar, who would have liked the chance to rebuff his one and only occurrence.

My "What Would Nietzsche Do?" query prompted analogous questions. Pessimistic ideas are powerfully expressed in the biblical wisdom literature. What might those ancient texts have to say about Benatar's particular species of pessimism, with its modern and hedonic underpinnings? And—perhaps less seriously—what would the Anglican sisters of the Community of St. John the Divine, whose mid-twentieth century nursing practices inspired the popular BBC show *Call the Midwife*, make of Benatar's arguments? Does Heaven know no fury like that of a nun whose life's vocation has been scorned?

In this vein, each of this forum's essays critiques Benatar's mindset from the perspective of a particular, robust tradition or school of thought—a competing comprehensive doctrine—each with its own rich dialectical history and its own substantive normative commitments. Perhaps we all have much to learn about philosophical pessimism—to what degree its judgments are truly underappreciated, and how best to respond to whatever insights it happens to embody—by seeing Benatar's especially pessimistic pessimism through the eyes of other feisty, well-established, generally pro-natalist worldviews: comprehensive doctrines that diverge from Benatar's guiding assumptions and that cannot sensibly be swatted away with an accusation of bias.

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[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kauffman (New York: Vintage Books, 1967 [1872]), 24.
[2] Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York: Penguin Books, 1975 [1942]), 15.
[3] Hud Hudson, *Fallenness and Flourishing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 2.
[4] Ibid., 48.
[5] Ibid., 2.
[6] Ibid., viii–ix.
[7] Ibid., 48.
[8] Ibid., x, 8.
[9] Ibid., 8.
[10] Ibid., 81.
[11] A reader of Benatar might wonder whether this attribution of hedonism is accurate, as Benatar does occasionally speak positively of various "goods," such as living meaningfully. For example, Benatar recently remarked, "I agree that meaning can be sought and found in hardships and even in poor quality lives." But the text proceeds in a way that suggests the goodness of this good is reduced to the positive

mental state it might produce, with this pleasure subsequently added into Benatar's hedonic calculus: "When that meaning is *felt* then it can have some impact on the felt *quality* [of life] too, even though that positive impact does only marginally modulate the poor quality." See David Benatar, "Misconceived: Why These Further Criticisms of Anti-Natalism Fail," *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 56/1 (2022): 119–151, at 135.

[12] Declan Leary, "Against Anti-Natalism," *National Review*, May 29, 2019, online at https://www.nationalreview.com/2019/05/anti-natalism-argument-david-benatar-wrong/.

[13] David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 76–77.

[14] Kenton Engel, "The Anti-Natalist Paradox," *Quillette*, December 22, 2018, online at https://quillette.com/2018/12/22/the-anti-natalist-paradox/.

[15] Also, see "Why It Is Better Never to Come into Existence," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 34/3 (1997): 345–355, and *The Human Predicament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[16] Joshua Rothman, "The Case for Not Being Born," *The New Yorker*, November 27, 2017, online at https://www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-case-for-not-being-born.