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## **Diplomová práce**

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**The Value of Human Existence**

Hodnota lidské existence

## Poděkování:

Na tomto místě děkuji zejména vedoucímu mé práce doc. Jakubovi Jirsovi, Ph.D. za vstřícnost, věcné poznámky a cenné rady. Mimo to také děkuji mému příteli a přátelům, kteří mi byli oporou při tvorbě této práce.

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V Praze .....

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## **Abstrakt**

Mnoho autorů etických textů bere lidskou existenci automaticky jako „přínos“ (v dějinách filosofie např. Aristotelés). Vidí její hodnotu jako pozitivní, nehledě na to, jakou kvalitu život daného člověka má. Tento předpoklad v drtivé většině případů žádným způsobem argumentačně nepodporují. Je otázkou, zda jde o triviální tvrzení, které není potřeba podpořit argumentací. Někteří současní autoři ukazují, že toto tvrzení triviální není, popřípadě dokonce tvrdí, že žádná pozitivní hodnota lidské existence jako takové neexistuje (Benatar). Ve své práci chci hlouběji prozkoumat tuto problematiku a zabývat se tím, jaké důsledky může pro etické teorie mít, když připustíme, že lidská existence nemusí být automaticky pozitivní hodnotou. Konkrétně se chci zaměřit na Davida Benatara a Dereka Parfita. Derek Parfit ve svých textech nikde jmenovitě Benatara nezmiňuje, nicméně existují pasáže, které by bylo možné považovat za kritiku Benatara. V první fázi práce vyložím argumentaci Davida Benatara a jeho koncepci antinatalismu. V druhé části pak představím Parfitovu obhajobu vlastních dober samotné lidské existence. V závěru práce pak představím možný dialog mezi Parfitem a Benatarem.

## **Klíčová slova**

Existence, antinatalismus, Benatar, Parfit, hodnota, benefit, újma, problém neidentity, populační etika

## **Abstract**

Many authors of ethical texts take human existence automatically as a "benefit" (e.g. Aristotle in the history of philosophy). They see its value as positive, regardless of the quality of the person's life. In the vast majority of cases, they do not support this assumption in any way. It is a question whether this is a trivial claim that does not need to be supported by argumentation. Some contemporary authors show that this claim is not trivial, or even claim that there is no positive value of human existence as such (Benatar). In my work, I want to explore this issue more deeply and deal with what consequences it can have for ethical theories if we accept that human existence does not automatically have to be a positive value. In particular, I want to focus on David Benatar and Derek Parfit. Derek Parfit does not mention Benatar by name anywhere in his texts, however there are passages that could be considered criticism of Benatar. In the first phase of the work, I will explain David Benatar's argumentation and his concept of antinatalism. In the second part, I will present Parfit's defense of the inherent goods of human existence itself. At the end of the work, I will present a possible dialogue between Parfit and Benatar.

## **Key words**

Existence, antinatalism, Benatar, Parfit, value, benefit, harm, Non-Identity Problem, population ethics

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Many historical and contemporary authors of ethical texts, and many legal systems around the world, take it for granted that existence is automatically a benefit. The motivations for such an approach vary. Historically, religion, especially Christianity, has certainly had a major impact on this issue. Some contemporary authors (mainly and most notably Peter Singer) have drawn attention to the concept of the "sanctity of human life", which captures a general idea that human life has a unique meaning and value compared to the lives of other living beings, making it untouchable and even sacred. As a direct consequence, we should protect and preserve human life at all costs. This concept is the basis for a wide range of ethical and political decisions, laws, and legal norms. It also supports general anthropocentrism and has significant implications for ethics.

This is just one example of how human existence and human life is seen as beneficial in itself and superior to the existence of other beings. What is even more interesting is that this view is often taken almost as axiomatic or with very little argument to support it. I do not think it is a trivial claim to make, and I also think that if you are going to claim that existence is a benefit in itself, there should be a proper argumentation behind it.

Some of the contemporary authors, such as David Benatar, try to show that this claim is many things, but not trivial. Benatar also provides counterarguments that make us question this position, or at least find a better (or at least some) arguments to support it.

My aim in this paper is to explore this problem in depth and to consider the implications for ethical theories if we allow that human existence is not necessarily of positive value. My main focus will be on the ideas of David Benatar and Derek Parfit. Parfit does not explicitly mention Benatar in his texts, but there are passages that could be taken as an implicit critique of Benatar's position. Benatar, on the other hand, openly discusses some of Parfit's ideas in his book and articles. First, I will give a detailed overview of Benatar's position and the arguments that support his conception of antinatalism. In the second part I will present Parfit's main problems with population ethics and how he argues for existential benefit. The final section of this thesis will be concerned with finding common ground, identifying differences and similarities, and outlining a possible dialogue between the two authors.

## 2. DAVID BENATAR

David Benatar is a very distinct figure in contemporary ethics. His often controversial views challenge conventional notions about the value of human life and sentient life in general.

The main domains of Benatar's writing are Antinatalism and The Asymmetry Argument and The Deluded Gladness Argument. These concepts are closely intertwined in Benatar's work. Antinatalism states that it is morally wrong to bring new sentient beings into existence. Benatar tries to show that individuals brought into existence inevitably face various forms of suffering, and that this suffering always outweighs the joys of life. The only way to avoid these inherent difficulties of life is not to be born at all. The Asymmetry Argument is then the core argument of Benatar's anti-natalist position. Essentially, it deals with the asymmetry between pain and pleasure. The presence of pain has more substantial negative effects than the absence of pleasure, which has no negative effects at all.

My aim in this chapter is to introduce Benatar's antinatalism, explain the main concepts that Benatar uses, and then explain The Asymmetry Argument and everything that surrounds it in more detail.

### 2.1. What is Antinatalism?

Antinatalism is the philosophical position that the birth and procreation of all human beings and all sentient beings in general is morally wrong. The first person to use the term "antinatalism" was probably the French writer and philosopher Théophile de Giraud, who published his book *L'art de guillotiner les procréateurs: Manifeste anti-nataliste* in 2006. Next in line was none other than David Benatar to whom this chapter is dedicated.

As Benatar points out in his book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*, there are many possible motivations for anti-natalist views. Some may be based on a simple dislike of children, some on a belief that there are other goals in life that can give it meaning, some on a desire for the freedom that a childless life can undeniably offer... Benatar's



position is based on concern for potential children and the level of suffering they would face if they were brought into existence.<sup>1</sup>

Benatar's basic assertion is that "*coming into existence is always a serious harm*"<sup>2</sup>. While the basic idea behind this claim is that:

*"Although the good things in one's life make it go better than it otherwise would have gone, one could not have been deprived by their absence if one had not existed. Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence."*<sup>3</sup>

This claim, and the arguments Benatar uses to support it, will be discussed in detail in the following sections. Although Benatar focuses mainly on humans and human procreation, he makes it clear that he believes that coming into existence is a harm to all sentient beings because they can experience harm. As my thesis leans towards the value of human life, I will mainly focus on the implications of Benatar's theory for human beings. In this section, my aim is to show how Benatar views human life and what his motivations are for the position he holds.

Benatar believes that, contrary to popular belief, human life is quite devastating. In his book *The Human Predicament* he lists a large number of miseries and misfortunes that come with being a living human being. He points to annoying biological needs such as constant thirst or hunger, the need to go to the toilet, thermal discomfort and others. Another notional category is what Benatar calls, "*frustrations and irritations*" such as waiting for buses, filling in all sorts of forms, standing in queues, etc. The last major category could probably be considered as some issues that have a negative effect on our mental health and personal integrity, examples of this category could be things like unfulfilled aspirations, the desire to remain young, the inevitability of one's death and many others. It is also somehow obvious, even in very early passages of Benatar's text, that he believes that human life consists of far more of these bad things than the good ones, and he does not stop there. Benatar also believes that:

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<sup>1</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 1.

*"...the positive features of life, although good for those who exist, cannot justify the negative features that accompany them. Their absence would not have been a deprivation for one who never came into existence."<sup>4</sup>*

Perhaps the final notions to understand the basis of Benatar's conception of antinatalism are his views on the motivations for having children and the so-called 'pro-natal bias'. In particular, Benatar pauses over the uncontroversial assertion that people usually go to great lengths to prevent their children from suffering. According to Benatar, it is somehow shortsighted of these people to overlook the only real way to achieve this – *"not to bring those children into existence in the first place."*<sup>5</sup> I find this observation particularly interesting. In the light of Benatar's words, the decision to have a child feels like a very selfish one. Which is an interesting turn of events, since the person who wants to remain childfree is usually the one who is called selfish. I must also add that these accusations are usually not followed by any argument. If we accept Benatar's reason for remaining childfree, ergo not bringing children into existence because of all the inevitable suffering they would endure, then the decision not to have children becomes anything but selfish. Benatar points out that anti-natalist views, whatever their original motivation, face a very strong pro-natalist bias. According to Benatar, this bias is mainly rooted in primal aspects of human psychology and biology.<sup>6</sup> People pass on their genetic information in order to maintain a certain superiority, and there is often a visible urge to preserve the species (or perhaps the race in the case of some individuals). It is interesting that Benatar's position is so radically anti-naturalistic. We could probably argue that, biologically speaking, one of the main signs of a living being is reproduction. Yet Benatar makes the ethical and metaphysical argument here that it is wrong. I wonder why that is. The only possible explanation that comes to mind is that Benatar sees people today as rational beings who should be driven by conclusions that come from reasoning rather than biological impulses. Unfortunately, Benatar does not specify his background for this argument.

Having children is also about the value of a person in a society. This means that having children is part of a higher social status, while not following this convention is frowned upon, if nothing else. The pro-natal bias is deeply embedded in our society and its structures, which can be seen in many ways.

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<sup>4</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 8.

*"For example, there is the assumption that one should (get married or simply cohabit in order to) produce children, and that, infertility aside, one is either backward or selfish if one does not."<sup>7</sup>*

Let's focus on the note about infertility. I feel that this is something that shows how badly prejudiced our modern societies are. For example, if a person gets seriously injured and gets to the point where he or she can no longer do a sport or maybe continue to do a job that they have been doing, they are eventually told to accept their fate and get on with their life. When someone is infertile, no one expects them to just accept it. They are encouraged to try different treatments, go through IVF and many other things. Both cases are health care cases, so why do we treat them so differently?

Benatar also points to the role of governments in the problem of pro-natal bias. As we can see in many countries around the world, including our own, governments often try to encourage people (especially young people) to have children through tax breaks, housing subsidies and so on, in order to cope with an ageing population. Benatar also does not fail to mention that totalitarian regimes often encourage people to have more children. What Benatar overlooks, at least from my point of view, is that totalitarian regimes (and, unfortunately, some democracies today) do not stop at encouraging, they *regulate* the reproductive freedom. The pro-natal bias is so ingrained in our social structures that it enables governments and politicians to directly violate human rights, especially women's rights, which makes the pro-natal bias extremely dangerous. A very recent and also very frightening example of this is the most definitely overturning *Roe vs. Wade*<sup>8</sup> in the US and the impact this will have on reproductive freedom and human rights across the US. There are many laws and bills that have been passed since *Roe vs. Wade* was overturned, and dealing with them would make for another whole thesis. So, I will just mention one of them to support my point that pro-natal bias is extremely dangerous. In March 2023, State Representative Rob Harris in North Carolina proposed a bill that would allow the death penalty for having an abortion, and those cases would be treated as homicide.<sup>9</sup> The bill has not yet been passed and is unlikely to be, at least for now. This does not

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> *Roe vs. Wade* was a legal case and its outcome was a ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court made in 1973, which set a precedent. By the ruling of the Court, Constitution of the United States protected a right to undergo an abortion.

<sup>9</sup> BUSTOS, Joseph. South Carolina bill allows death penalty for abortion. Could it pass?. *The Seattle Times* [online]. Seattle, 2023, March 15, 2023 at 5:27 pm [cit. 2023-03-27]. Dostupné z:

<https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/south-carolina-bill-allows-death-penalty-for-abortion-could-it-pass/>

mean that there is no support for the bill, and it does not make it any less repugnant. Unfortunately, we do not have to look across the ocean to see how bad the pro-natal bias can be. The situation with reproductive rights in Poland is also heartbreaking, and Slovakia is very close to suffering the same fate. The regulation of reproductive rights is an immense power move that affects the lives of all people, and the pro-natalist bias, which is very rarely reflected upon, allows this move to be made in the first place. Another point Benatar makes is that democracies often shy away from solving the problems of an ageing population through immigration. It seems rather odd that democratic societies would prefer to regulate reproductive rights and freedom as preferable solution over immigration. In my view, this only reinforces the belief that the regulation of reproductive rights has many other motivations than simply creating more taxpayers.

## 2.2. Lives worth ...

Before presenting his main argument, Benatar distinguishes and characterises the following concepts: *lives worth living*, *lives not worth living*, *lives worth starting* and *lives worth continuing*. Let's concentrate on the first two. Benatar tries to show that it is commonly believed that the factors that would make a life not worth living are tied to the fact that the person living that life exists. Based on this notion it is said that it is not possible to claim that one would not have been harmed by these problems if one had not been brought into existence. The reason is that the distinction between a life worth living and a life not worth living is made by comparing two states, where a person is either better or worse off in one state than in the other. When we try to answer the question of whether a person whose life is not worth living would be better off if they had never been brought into existence, we are not comparing two states that are possible for a person. Benatar then goes on to show how the correct argument should go.

Benatar points out that:

*"The expression 'a life worth living' is ambiguous between 'a life worth continuing'—let us call this the present-life sense—and 'a life worth starting'—let us call this the future-life sense."*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 22.

This distinction is important to Benatar, because concepts of *life worth continuing* and *life not worth continuing* deal with people, who have been brought into existence. The concepts *life worth starting* and *life not worth starting* can be raised in relation to "a potential, but non-existent being."<sup>11</sup> According to Benatar, lives not worth living are those that would not be worth continuing, and lives worth living would be worth continuing. The problem with the argument in the previous paragraph, according to Benatar, is that it makes judgements about cases that occur in the future based on standards that apply to cases that occur in the present.

*„However, quite different standards apply in the two kinds of case. The judgement that an impairment is so bad that it makes life not worth continuing is usually made at a much higher threshold than the judgement that an impairment is sufficiently bad to make life not worth beginning. That is to say, if a life is not worth continuing, a fortiori it is not worth beginning. It does not follow, however, that if a life is worth continuing it is worth beginning or that if it is not worth beginning it would not be worth continuing.“<sup>12</sup>*

To unravel this – Benatar is basically noticing one of the asymmetries of the common intuition that a stronger justification is needed for ending a life than for not starting one. Imagine, for example, a person who has suffered a serious injury during their life and as a result has lost the ability to walk and has to use a wheelchair. Most of the people would probably say, that their life is not that bad, that it would be worth ending it. Most people would probably say that their life is not so bad that it would be worth ending it. On the other hand, the same people would probably argue that it is not worth bringing a person into existence who would be born without the ability to walk and who would have to live their life in a wheelchair. In other words, Benatar points out that once we are brought into existence in a morally relevant sense, our interest in preserving a life is stronger and probably even more morally relevant. We form relationships with other people, we fill multiple roles, whether personal or professional, and so on, which makes our lives intertwined with others and this only increases the weight of our interest in continuing to live. As we age, we are willing to sacrifice more in order to stay alive, as our interest in holding on to life increases over a longer period of time.<sup>13</sup>

Benatar's next step is to show is, to explain the following claim:

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<sup>11</sup> Ibidem, p. 22. <sup>12</sup>

Ibidem, p. 23. <sup>13</sup>

Ibidem, p. 173.

*„There is nothing paradoxical about the claim that it is preferable not to begin a life that would be worth continuing.“<sup>14</sup>*

He sees the problem in the conflict between future-life and present-life sense. He sees this as a morally relevant and even morally important distinction. The non-paradoxical nature of the claim that it is preferable not to begin a life that would be worth living lies in the fact that we are considering two states, each of which is concerned with something different. The correct pairs would be A) life worth starting and life not worth starting (future-life sense); B) life worth continuing and life not worth continuing (present-life sense). If we mix and match, it simply does not make sense for Benatar, since each, future-life sense, and present-life sense, considers qualitatively different cases.

Now that we understand how Benatar works with the concepts of the worth of life, we can move on to the main parts of Benatar's text where he defends his notion that coming into existence is always a harm.

*„‘When is never existing preferable?’ Put another way, ‘When does coming into existence harm?’ Alternatively we can ask, ‘When is coming into existence bad while never coming into existence not bad?’ The answer, I shall now argue, is ‘Always’.“<sup>15</sup>*

### 2.3. Harm of coming into existence

As I noted in the introductory parts of this thesis, and as Benatar noted in his book, many writers on ethics, and in general pretty much everyone else, consider being brought into existence to be a benefit. Benatar, on the other hand, says that being brought into existence is *always* a harm.<sup>16</sup> Benatar begins by distinguishing himself and his statement from hypothetical cases in which life would consist only of good and no bad. I have no problem with this, because I also think that these hypothetical cases would not bring any stimulating points, because they are completely unrealistic. Nevertheless, Benatar could not resist commenting on such a case: *"About such an existence I say that it is neither a harm nor a benefit and we should be indifferent*

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<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 28.

*between such an existence and never existing.*"<sup>17</sup> I would agree with Benatar if his comment focused only on the single point of being born, because I think we could take the position that there is nothing positive or negative at the point of being born. It could be seen as a kind of "point zero", which is neutral in itself, and whether or not a person will have a good life, a life worth living, is a question. Of course, we can make assumptions about how a future person's life might go, sometimes these assumptions are very accurate and sometimes they are completely wrong. What we can never know for sure is how the actual person will feel about their life, which is the only thing that really matters in the end. Anyway, I have the feeling that a life or existence that consists only of good and no bad (as unrealistic as that may be) would be an advantage, at least from the subjective point of view of the person living it. When Benatar says that we should be indifferent between such an existence and never existing, I wonder why that is. Is it that the subjective feeling of benefit from existence is morally irrelevant? Benatar is a little ambiguous here, which is a shame, because this idea is interesting and far from obvious.

No life is without harm or bad things. There is a great deal of suffering associated with existence. Everyone experiences pain, grief, betrayal and many other things in their lives. We all face the inevitability of our own death. Of course, there are very different levels and amounts of suffering experienced by different people. This can be based on who they are, where they live, who they live with, how lucky, or unlucky they are in life... I think none of this is a controversial statement. That said, Benatar adds that he does not believe that the good things in life, such as pleasure, joy or love, can ever outweigh the bad. He explains this in The Asymmetry Argument.

#### 2.4. The Asymmetry Argument

*„Consider pains and pleasures as exemplars of harms and benefits. It is uncontroversial to say that*

*(1) the presence of pain is bad,*

*and that*

*(2) the presence of pleasure is good.*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 29.

*However, such a symmetrical evaluation does not seem to apply to the absence of pain and pleasure, for it strikes me as true that*

*(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.*<sup>18</sup>

Since the first two points are fairly straightforward, Benatar focuses mainly on points three and four and the asymmetries associated with them. Benatar explains that point (3) is directed towards the potential interests of a potential person who may or may not exist – a person who may or may not have been brought into existence. I think this can be shown in two very simple scenarios.

- a) a person is brought into existence
- b) a person is not brought into existence

In the first case, as we noted earlier, the existing person inevitably experiences harm and suffering (although the amount varies from person to person). In the second case, the person is never born. This also means that this person never experiences any harm or suffering, simply because this person does not exist. Benatar says that the absence of pain and harm is generally good, even though there is no person to enjoy this good. This is not the case with pleasure, since its maximisation always requires a 'bearer' who would benefit from that pleasure.

The asymmetry between points (3) and (4), according to Benatar, entails the explanation of four other asymmetries, which will be introduced shortly.

(i) The asymmetry of procreational duties<sup>19</sup>

Benatar explores the duties associated with procreation. He states that while we have a strong duty to avoid bringing into existence people who are likely to have a terrible life, there is no duty to bring into existence people who would have a happy life.<sup>20 21</sup> Frankly, I find this

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<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 30.

<sup>19</sup> BENATAR, David (2013). *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to My Critics*. The Journal of Ethics 17 (1-2):121-151, p.123.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p.123.

<sup>21</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 32.



very strange on several levels. Firstly, is there really a duty to avoid bringing suffering into existence? I would agree to the extent that we try to do that in some cases in Western societies. For example, we try not to bring into existence people who, on the basis of prenatal diagnosis, would suffer from some serious disease or disability, but that is one of not many systematic examples that I can think of. Secondly, if we really have such a duty, do we live up to it? In my daily life I see many examples of people who are brought into existence and are likely to suffer - births of unwanted children, people brought into existence in hostile environments (war zones, parts of the world with almost no access to water, poverty stricken...) and many others. That is the reason, why I really doubt that this copies real life experience. I understand that duty is not meant in the sense of law or anything like that. It is probably more of a duty in the sense of "not causing unnecessary harm, but I just don't see it in my life experience, and I don't think people think that way. They may say they do, but the results of their actions say otherwise. Someone might ask what the relationship is between duty and empirical experience. From my pragmatic point of view, I believe that duties should either benefit people, or protect people, or something like that. They should have a clear function, bringing order or guidance where it is needed. We should have duties that are useful, not just duties for the sake of duties. If we are going to have a duty, whether it is moral or enforced by law, I think it should reflect the realities of the situation in order to be useful.

(ii) The prospective beneficence asymmetry<sup>22</sup>

In the second asymmetry, Benatar notes the strangeness and inconsistency of reasoning about whether or not to have children. I guess you could say that people generally reason that bringing a child into existence is a benefit to that potential future child. Benatar points out that the same reasoning does not usually apply in the opposite scenario. That is, people do not usually use potential harm and suffering as a reason not to have a child.<sup>23 24</sup> I think this is a real experience. I think everyone can think of more than one example where a child has been brought into the world despite the expectation that the child would be harmed in some way. Maybe the prospective parents were not financially stable enough, or maybe they were too young to handle the responsibilities, etc. My point is that even in obvious cases, people choose to bring a child into the existence despite the obvious harm to the child.

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<sup>22</sup> BENATAR, David (2013). *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to My Critics*. The Journal of Ethics 17 (1-2):121-151, p.123.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p.123.

<sup>24</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 34.

(iii) The retrospective beneficence asymmetry<sup>25</sup>

The third asymmetry revises judgements made in hindsight. According to Benatar, if we bring a person into existence and that person suffers in their life, it is possible to regret having brought them into existence for their sake. Conversely, if we fail to bring a happy person into existence, we cannot regret that failure for that person's sake.<sup>26 27</sup> If we do not bring a person into existence, there is no one who would be deprived of happiness and pleasure. So there is no point in regretting it for their sake – there is no one in existence for us to regret.

(iv) The asymmetry of distant suffering and absent happy people<sup>28</sup>

For the fourth and final asymmetry, Benatar identifies two concepts:

(a) (distant) suffering

(b) uninhabited portions of the earth or the universe<sup>29</sup>

of which he makes judgements that show the core of this asymmetry. Benatar points out that we can feel sad or mourn for people who experience suffering in their lives. On the contrary, we don't feel bad or sad for people from, say, Mars, who would have been happy if they had been brought into existence. The point is quite simple – we feel sorry for people who are suffering, but we do not regret the lack of happiness or pleasure of people who were never brought into existence.

The function of the Asymmetry Argument is to show, that it is better never to come into existence. It is a further step, which Benatar takes, to show that coming into existence is actually always a harm. To illustrate this, Benatar provides this picture:

Scenario A  
(X exists)

Scenario B  
(X never exists)

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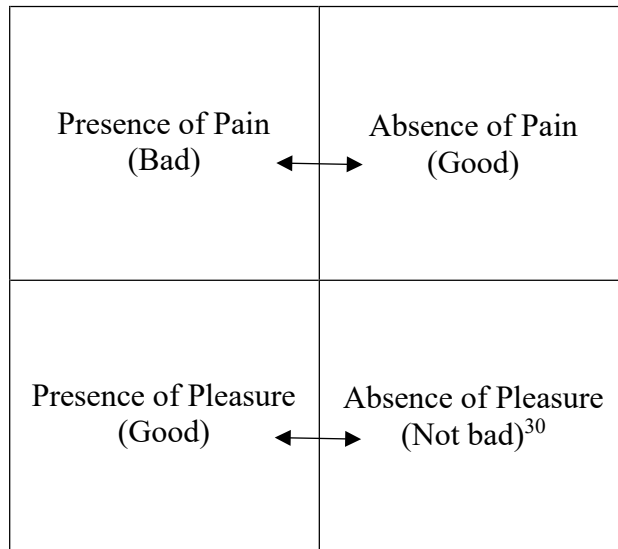
<sup>25</sup> BENATAR, David (2013). *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to My Critics*. The Journal of Ethics 17 (1-2):121-151, p.123.

<sup>26</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 34-35.

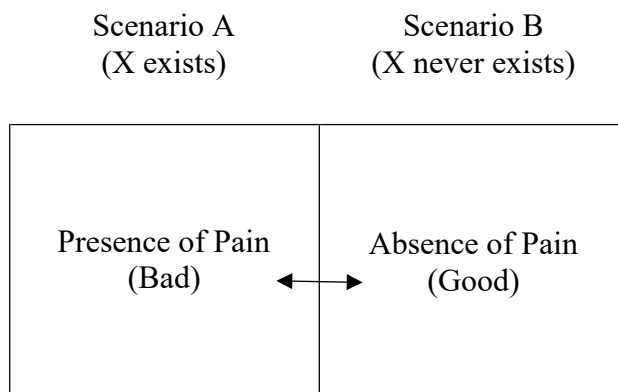
<sup>27</sup> BENATAR, David (2013). *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to My Critics*. The Journal of Ethics 17 (1-2):121-151, p.123.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p.123.

<sup>29</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 35.

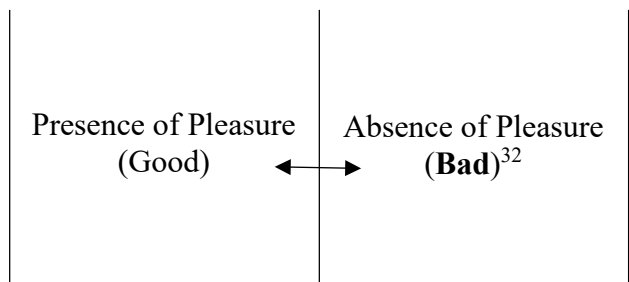


To explain the picture a little more: in scenario A, where a person exists, it is probably not problematic to say that the presence of pain is bad for this existing person, while the presence of pleasure is good for him. However, in scenario B, where a person was never brought into existence, the absence of pain is good, but the absence of pleasure is neutral (or not bad) because there is no one who would be deprived of that pleasure.<sup>31</sup> To further support this claim, Benatar shows what happens when we try to maintain symmetry between pleasure and pain. There are two possible approaches, which are best illustrated by a picture:

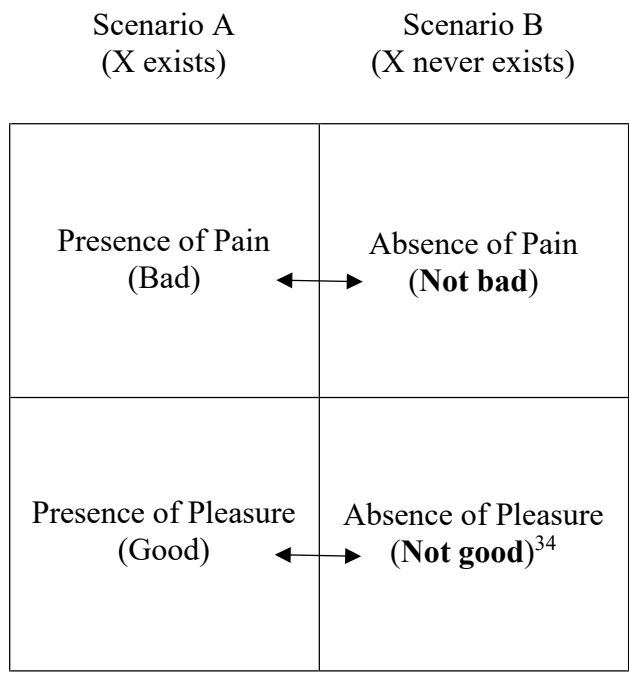


<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 38.



In order to maintain symmetry in the first case, Benatar changes the absence of pleasure in the case of person, who was never brought into existence from "not bad" to "bad". What happens is, that this judgement becomes stronger, than it is.<sup>33</sup> Benatar thinks so, because if the absence of pleasure is judged to be bad, it leads to a conclusion, that we should regret for X's sake, that X was never brought into existence. But there is no reason to regret potential human beings, who were never brought into existence. It is also not a realistic practice, since people do not usually operate that way.



To maintain symmetry in the second case, Benatar changes both states for scenario B – the person, who was never brought into existence. The absence of pain becomes “not bad”, and the absence of pleasure is now “not good”. According to Benatar, symmetry is not proven even in

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<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 39.  
<sup>33</sup> Ibidem, p. 39.  
<sup>34</sup> Ibidem, p. 40.

this case. He reminds the reader that the absence of pleasure cannot be described as "not good" because there is no one for whom it would be a deprivation or impoverishment.

Based on The Asymmetry Argument and its defence, Benatar concludes:

*„The fact that one enjoys one’s life does not make one’s existence better than non-existence, because if one had not come into existence there would have been nobody to have missed the joy of leading that life and thus the absence of joy would not be bad.“<sup>35</sup>*

## 2.5. Recapitulation and pinpointing of Benatar's main arguments

Benatar essentially offers two qualitatively different arguments in support of his anti-natalist position. His first argument is often referred to as The Deluded Gladness Argument. This argument has been partially presented in previous chapters, and basically says that our evaluation of life tends to be positive overall, but according to Benatar this assumption is always wrong.

As mentioned several times before, Benatar believes, that coming into existence is always a great harm. This seems to be contradicted by many people who consider their lives to be generally good, perhaps even great. Benatar believes, that these assumptions are products of delusion. Benatar argues that:

*„There are a number of well-known features of human psychology that can account for the favourable assessment people usually make of their own life’s quality. It is these psychological phenomena rather than the actual quality of a life that explain (the extent of) the positive assessment.“<sup>36</sup>*

By "psychological phenomena", Benatar is referring to the Pollyanna principle, which is also often called Pollyannaism or positive bias. This principle was in detail described by Margaret Matlin and David Stang in 1978 as the tendency of people to remember pleasant memories more accurately than unpleasant ones. Studies of this principle have also shown that most of the people tend to expose themselves to positive stimuli and avoid negative ones, which is probably not surprising. What is interesting, however, is that the exact same people take longer

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<sup>35</sup> Ibidem, p. 58.

<sup>36</sup> Ibidem, p. 64.

to recognise what is unpleasant or even dangerous, than what is pleasant and safe. There is also a temporal factor – when people recall an event with a delay, their memories are much more selective, with a bias towards the positive ones.<sup>37</sup> Benatar gives several examples of what he sees as the effects of Pollyannaism. He argues that people tend to have a strong positive bias about the future, in the sense that they overestimate how good the future will be for them. According to Benatar, people also misjudge their own health, again towards a more positive outcome.<sup>38</sup> He also claims that "*most people believe that they are better off than most others or than the average person.*"<sup>39</sup> It is obviously not very intuitive to suggest that just about everyone alive today suffers from Pollyannaism. Benatar explains this by pointing to another psychological phenomenon that influences the reliability of our self-assessments and can support Pollyannaism: "*adaptation, accommodation, or habituation.*"<sup>40</sup> This means that when a person's life takes a significant turn for the worse, they are likely to experience some disappointment and discomfort at first, but soon they will adapt and adjust their expectations to keep up with the new situation, while maintaining an outlook on life that is not destructive for the person in question. The final supporting phenomenon Benatar mentions is comparison with others. This means that assessments of one's own well-being are often the result of a comparison with the well-being of others. They are therefore not comparisons of one's own actual well-being, and they also suffer from the inaccuracy of the lens through which we perceive other people's lives.<sup>41</sup> In conclusion, Benatar argues that there is a difference between one's self-assessment of one's well-being and one's actual well-being. Once we understand this, and realise that human life is not as rosy as we thought, Benatar suggests a test: would we willingly inflict on another person the serious harm that life inflicts on them every day? His answer, of course, is that we wouldn't. So, the next steps are quite clear - should we then bring new people into existence, knowing that coming into existence is inherently linked to these harms?<sup>42</sup> The Deluded Gladness Argument also functions as a support for Benatar's second argument – The Asymmetry Argument – which was presented in the previous chapter.

Benatar's position faces a large number of criticisms, so we will now discuss some of the major criticisms of Benatar's position overall and for each of the two arguments presented.

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<sup>37</sup> MATLIN, M. W.; STANG, D. J. (1978). *The Pollyanna Principle: Selectivity in Language, Memory, and Thought*. ISBN 978-0-87073-815-9.

<sup>38</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 64-67.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 66.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 64-68.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86-88.

## 2.6. Problematic implications of Benatar's views

Benatar's version of antinatalism, and the arguments he puts forward to support it, have sparked a wide and passionate debate. As there are a large number of different critiques, it is unfortunately not possible to include them all. Therefore, I will only select and present those that I find particularly interesting or relevant to the topic of my thesis. I will draw primarily from Benatar's article *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics*<sup>43</sup> and the original texts of the authors mentioned in the article.

### 2.6.1. Challenges to The Asymmetry Argument

Elizabeth Harman makes a direct attack on Benatar's Asymmetry Argument and its function. She believes that Benatar *"equivocates between impersonal goodness and goodness for a person"*<sup>44</sup>. In essence, Harman agrees with Benatar that it is true that the presence of pain is bad, but she adds that it is bad in both ways – personally and impersonally. On the other hand, the same is not true of the absence of pain. The absence of pain is only good impersonally, since there is no person in existence for whom the absence of pain could be personally good. So, according to Harman, Benatar has to show if and how the absence of pain can be personally good, otherwise the asymmetry does not work. Benatar responds to Harman's criticism by stressing that he is not making an impersonal evaluation.

*"I am concerned instead with whether coming into existence is in the interests of the person who comes into existence or whether it would have been better for that person if he had never been. I am interested in whether coming into existence is better or worse for that person rather than with whether, for example, the world would be better if he exists."*<sup>45</sup>

This is interesting because Harman's criticism was that Benatar fails to provide a justification for why the absence of pain is personally good for a person who never exists. Benatar goes on to argue that people have difficulty with the idea *"that never existing can be better for a person who never exists."*<sup>46</sup> The difficulty of this idea lies in the argument that, in the case of people

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<sup>43</sup> BENATAR, David (2013). *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to My Critics*. The Journal of Ethics 17 (1-2):121-151.

<sup>44</sup> HARMAN, Elizabeth. (2009). *Critical study of Benatar* (2006). *Nous* 43: 776-785, p. 780.

<sup>45</sup> BENATAR, David (2013). *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to My Critics*. The Journal of Ethics 17 (1-2):121-151, p. 125.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 125.

who never come into existence, there is no subject who would benefit from their non-existence. Another author who makes similar remarks to Harman is David DeGrazia, when he claims that:

*"Only actual beings have interests. Now, if one does bring a child into existence when one should not have done so because the child's prospects were so poor, then there is a victim of one's wrongful choice: the actually existing child. But it does not follow from this, nor does it make much sense in my judgment, to claim that some indeterminate, merely possible child benefits from a decision not to bring him into existence."<sup>47</sup>*

Benatar admits that if a person never exists, then there is really no actual subject who would benefit from never coming into existence. But according to Benatar, we can still argue that it is better for a person never to exist, because the whole idea is more complex. This is what Benatar means:

*"We are comparing two possible worlds - one in which a person exists and one in which he does not. One way in which we can judge which of these possible worlds is better, is with reference to the interests of the person who exists in one (and only one) of these two possible worlds. Obviously those interests only exist in the possible world in which the person exists, but this does not preclude our making judgments about the value of an alternative possible world, and doing so with reference to the interests of the person in the possible world in which he does exist."<sup>48</sup>*

This is how Benatar defends his Asymmetry Argument. I do not think, that Benatar has successfully defended the asymmetry. The two-world situation is helpful in clarifying Benatar's position, but I do not think it supports The Asymmetry Argument, or at least it does not solve the problem that Benatar's critics have proposed. I think this example shows how we could defend that it would be better if a person never came into existence. What is missing in the example is an explanation of how never coming into existence would benefit that person personally. The problem of the missing subject who would benefit from never coming into existence is simply too strong and very difficult to overcome if, it can be overcome at all. The

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<sup>47</sup> DeGRAZIA, David (2010). *Is it wrong to impose the harms of human life? A reply to Benatar*. *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 31:31 7-33 1, p. 323.

<sup>48</sup> BENATAR, David (2013). *Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to My Critics*. *The Journal of Ethics* 17 (1-2):121-151, p. 125.



question is whether this means that Benatar must face up to impersonal utilitarianism and its consequences. I do not think he does, because the problem is not that his view is impersonal in itself, and therefore he cannot show how a person would personally benefit from never coming into existence. The problem is that in this case there never is a person, and that is why he cannot show how it could be personally good for them. However, whether or not The Asymmetry Argument works, I think that Benatar makes a very compelling case for showing that coming into existence is inherently connected with harm, and I think that this case alone is sufficient to consider whether it is morally right to bring new people into existence. This is largely derived from The Deluded Gladness Argument, the possible weaknesses of which are the subject of the next chapter.

### 2.6.2. Challenges to The Deluded Gladness Argument

Elizabeth Harman challenges Benatar's Deluded Gladness on two fronts. First, by arguing that bodily states such as hunger, thirst or fatigue are not bad or contribute to overall harm. She sees these states as neutral, or perhaps even good. In his response, Benatar points out that Harman does not really specify what she means by this.<sup>49</sup> It could be that hunger or thirst, for example, are instrumentally good because they give us a signal about the state of our body that we should pay attention to. But that in itself does not make them feel good or neutral, because they are still unpleasant.

Second, by pointing out that Benatar does not distinguish between higher quality pleasures and minor pain when she claims that:

*"ordinary lives contain many minor distresses that we do not normally pay attention to ... there are certain positive features of our lives that are much more valuable than these negative features are bad"*<sup>50</sup>

Basically, she argues that some of what Benatar calls harms (physical discomfort, waiting, filling in forms, being let down, etc.) are minor harms that can be outweighed by high-quality pleasures (such as meaningful relationships with other people, a sense of fulfilment, etc.) Personally, I am not convinced by this criticism. I think it is possible to argue that there are some lower quality harms and higher quality pleasures and still hold the position that coming

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<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 121-151.

<sup>50</sup> HARMAN, Elizabeth. (2009). *Critical study of Benatar* (2006). *Nous* 43: 776-785, p. 783.

into existence is always a harm. Or at least always to a significant degree. Waiting for buses, temporary discomfort, being hungry or having to go to the toilet several times a day may not be the biggest nuisances there are, but they are ubiquitous and, more importantly, this is by no means an exhaustive list. I think there are two basic types of these discomforts and harms, one is related to having a body and the need to take care of that body. The other is related to the way our societies work. From the smallest things, such as unnecessary bureaucracy, various pressures from family and society, the need for a stable income and so on, to the bigger problems, such as being discriminated against, perhaps being threatened by other people and many others. So, I agree with Benatar that life is really made up of frustrations, irritations, pain and damage.<sup>51</sup> Most of them may be small, but there are a lot of them, and they are everywhere. So human life is inherently connected with harm, and I also believe that the greater pleasures mentioned by Harman can be outweighed by the sum of the harm imposed.

### 2.6.3. Sexism challenge and impacts of widespread acceptance of anti-natalism

In her book *Why Have Children?*<sup>52</sup>, Christine Overall criticises Benatar's views on several levels. The criticism I find most interesting is the one that deals with reproductive freedom and the possibility that anti-natalism is a sexist position. Overall distinguishes three different problems of this kind in Benatar's text. The first problem concerns the duty to procreate. When Benatar claims:

*"Given that having children involves considerable sacrifice (at least to the pregnant woman), this, and not asymmetry, is the best explanation for why there is no duty to bring happy people into existence. The problem, though, with this alternative explanation is that it implies that in the absence of this sacrifice we would have a duty to bring happy people into existence. In other words, it would be wrong not to create such people if we could create them without great cost to ourselves."<sup>53</sup>*

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<sup>51</sup> The difference between my viewpoint and Benatar's is, that even though I believe, that coming into existence is always harm, I do not think, that this is just the way things are. I believe that most of these harms and pains that make life to be an inherent harm, humans inflicted upon themselves. We constructed a world that is so unfriendly for pretty much anyone who is not in a position of great power, whatever that means. So compared to Benatar, I do believe, that current status of human life is theoretically salvageable, although sadly, I do not see that happening in the future.

<sup>52</sup> OVERALL, Christine. *Why Have Children?: The Ethical Debate*. The MIT Press, 2012.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhd2w>.

<sup>53</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 33.

Overall argues that even if there were no such sacrifice (i.e. pregnancy and all the terrible things that come with it), there would still be no duty to procreate. Even if pregnancy were a sacrifice-free and painless, women still have no duty to procreate, because of reproductive freedom and because what happens to their bodies is solely their decision.<sup>54</sup> Nobody else's. I completely agree with Overall.

Second, Overall objects to the possibility of cost-free procreation. Again, this is objectively true. Nine months of pregnancy and childbirth sounds terrible enough, and unfortunately it is not the end, because pregnancy and childbirth are far from the only sacrifices. Women's health is at risk during childbirth. A woman's career and independence are usually compromised as a by-product of having a child. For a woman, having a child is inherently a sacrifice on every conceivable level. And there are sacrifices that affect both parents, such as redistribution of income, great responsibility for a life other than their own, sleep deprivation and many others. So the argument that there could be procreation without cost is ridiculous.

Overall's final insight, which I would like to include, concerns the possible consequences of a widely accepted anti-natalism. Overall's main concern is whether this scenario is another way of restricting women's reproductive freedom. Also, whether there would be a greater danger for women as a direct consequence of widely accepted anti-natalism. Endangerment in the sense of violence against pregnant women and female infanticide by preventing more people from being brought into existence. Benatar responds to Overall by arguing that his argument is about morality, not lawmaking and law enforcement. Benatar does not argue that procreation should be banned, only that it is morally wrong to create new human beings because of the harm that awaits them. Benatar still believes this:

*“Contraception and abortion should not be legally mandatory even though contraception and early abortion are morally required.”<sup>55</sup>*

Benatar also notes that the anti-natalist view can be beneficial for women, as it contradicts the usual outdated convention that sees women as child bearers.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> OVERALL, Christine. *Why Have Children?: The Ethical Debate*. The MIT Press, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhd2w>, p. 113-116.

<sup>55</sup> BENATAR, David (2019). *Not “Not ‘Better Never to Have Been’”*: A Reply to Christine Overall. *Philosophia* 47 (2):353-367.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 353-367.

Although I feel that in the latter case Benatar has managed to stand up to Overall's criticism. Overall's concern about whether Benatar considers the situation of women when talking about procreation has, in my opinion, proved to be justified. For in the case of the first two, there is a visible neglect of the impact of procreation on women.

Another interesting question, which has considerable explanatory power for Benatar's view of the total value of human life, is the question of suicide. If we accept Benatar's antinatalism and the main premise that coming into existence is always harm, what does this mean for people who are already alive. While Benatar discusses the harm and suffering that can be inherent in life, he does not suggest that individuals should end their lives as a response to these challenges. He does not endorse or promote suicide. He claims that his primary focus is on the ethical considerations surrounding procreation and the morality of creating new human beings. Based on the arguments presented earlier in this thesis, he believes that the correct moral position is not to procreate. According to Benatar, people who already exist, even though their lives are inextricably linked to harm, typically have an interest in continuing to live. This means that for suicide to be justified, our lives would have to be extremely bad.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 211-220.

### 3. DEREK PARFIT

Derek Parfit, in his book *Reasons and Persons* came up with two different problems that he could not deal with in the book, so he returned to them again and again throughout his life's work. Both problems are in a set of so-called population ethics, and although they are distinct problems, there are cases or points where they overlap.

The first of these problems deals with the ethical relevance and obligations we may have to future generations. This problem is also concerned with questions of personal identity (or perhaps non-identity in this case) and with defining what it means to harm someone and in what connotations it is possible to speak of harming someone. The second problem concerns the overall happiness and quality of life in societies, and whether it is possible to achieve greater levels of happiness simply by mere addition of people.

I present these problems because they are inextricably linked to the problems of intrinsic goods, existential benefit, and the definition of what it means for a life to be worth living. These are all concepts and notions that are closely related to the value of human life and the status of existence, which is the subject of my thesis. These issues also form the basis of a mutual discussion between Benatar and Parfit, which I intend to present in the last part of this thesis. In particular, I am interested in whether Parfit provides sufficient arguments to support his conception of existential benefit, since this is in direct contrast to Benatar's view that existence is always a harm.

In this chapter I will briefly show the line of argument that led Parfit to these two problems. Then I will present each of them in more detail and try to show possible solutions to these problems as they are indicated in Parfit's later articles.

#### 3.1. Future as a morally relevant issue

Parfit's views on the future and its moral relevance are closely related to his conception of personal identity and ethics. Given the subject of this thesis, I will focus primarily on the views of the future that are related to the second. In the following chapters I will consider whether temporal or spatial distance is a determining factor in moral considerations. I will also look at what Parfit has to say about future people and how he builds up his well-known problems which are important for my thesis – namely The Non-Identity Problem and The Repugnant Conclusion.

For the sake of completeness of my reconstruction of Parfit's thought, I will now briefly outline how the problematic of the future relates to personal identity before proceeding with my case. However, it is not my aim to criticise or reconstruct the arguments Parfit presents for his views on personal identity.

Parfit argues that we have moral obligations to our future selves that are like our obligations to other people. He suggests that our future selves should be treated as morally relevant because they are continuous extensions of our personal identity. Parfit promotes his concept of „non-reductivism“, which means that he does not understand personal identity in terms of a fixed, unchanging self but rather as the continuity of certain mental states and characteristics, such as memories, beliefs, and desires. Therefore, our future selves, who share these states and characteristics with our present selves, and in whom these states are continuous, should be seen as extensions of who we are.

Moral obligations to our future selves are derived from the principle of temporal neutrality. Temporal neutrality basically means that we should not ascribe any normative significance to the temporal aspect of pleasures and pains. Each and every one of these pleasures and pains should be considered equally in the present moral consideration. However, this does not mean that time is not important at all – for example, if we are attacked by someone, it is still reasonable to defend ourselves, even if it means taking huge risks for our future, since we could be seriously injured, etc. Temporal neutrality means that we should not allow our preferences to be weighted by any kind of temporal bias. For example, we should not skip a training session we have signed up for just to avoid the work we would otherwise have to put in, as this is not in line with our obvious preference to stay healthy.

*„But on all plausible theories one point is agreed. When we are deciding what is in someone's interests, we should discount for uncertainty, but not for mere remoteness. We should not give less weight to this person's further future, or give greater weight to his present desires. ... We should give equal weight to all the parts of this person's life.“<sup>58</sup>*

Now let's take a step away from personal identity and instances of the effects of our actions on only our future selves and imagine that we extend what has been said to other future people.

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<sup>58</sup> PARFIT, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 162.

*„We could make similar claims about our future selves. If we now care little about ourselves in the further future, our future selves are like future generations. We can affect them for the worse, and, because they do not now exist, they cannot defend themselves. Like future generations, future selves have no vote, and their interests need to be protected.“<sup>59</sup>*

This is a very clever passage between the problems of personal identity in relation to ethics and the problems of future people. Future people or generations of people are in the near or distant future, as in the case of our future selves. What is true for our future selves should also be true for other future people because they are in the same position. The perspective presented challenges the idea of acting solely in one's own interest. Parfit argues that the moral relevance of the future gives us important implications about our obligations not only to ourselves or to people who exist today, but also to future generations. In this way, Parfit proposes a debate about expanding our ethical framework to include a broader temporal perspective and consideration of the long-term consequences of the actions and choices we make now.

### 3.2. Problematics of distance

As a prelude to other stages of *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit also considers whether distance has any moral significance, whether it be temporal or spatial. Parfit challenges another common intuition, or perhaps a more common feeling, that suffering that takes place in a time or space distant from us is less important. In other words, that spatial or temporal proximity should somehow affect our moral obligations.

I include this topic for two reasons. First, the problematic of distance is relevant to a proper understanding of The Non-Identity Problem. Second, I believe that considering whether distance is morally relevant is also important for discussing the value of human life – if the lives of people who are either spatially or temporally distant from us mattered less, what would that say about their value?

It is clear, that Parfit thinks, that spatial proximity is not morally relevant, when he says:

*„This man's pattern of concern crudely resembles the pattern that is common: greater concern for the members of our own community. But his concern draws another arbitrary line. If someone has no concern about others, this, though deplorable, may not be irrational.“*

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<sup>59</sup> Ibidem, p. 319.

*If someone is equally concerned about what happens to everyone, or is more concerned about what happens to the members of his own community, neither of these is irrational. But if someone is greatly concerned about what happens to those who are less than a mile away, and much less concerned about those who are more distant, this pattern of concern is irrational. How can it make a difference that one of two suffering strangers is just under, and the other just over, a mile away? That one of the two is more than a mile away is no reason for being less concerned.*<sup>60</sup>

From the quote above it is clear, at least I think it is, that according to Parfit spatial distance is not a constitutive aspect for a difference in moral consideration of a state of affairs. Which I think is objectively true. Let me give you an example: you have a considerable amount of money that you would like to donate to a good cause. Because you like animals, you decide to donate the money to an animal shelter, and you have to choose one of two options. Shelter A is in your area. The animals there are well cared for, but the shelter still needs money to pay for animal food, staff, etc. Shelter B is in another country, far away from where you are. This shelter has fewer resources than the first and is trying to save animals from local floods. Which should you choose? From a perspective that considers distance to be morally relevant, you might be more inclined to donate to shelter A. After all, it is in your neighbourhood, perhaps you could visit and see for yourself what difference your donation has made, and so on. However, if you accept Parfit's view and treat distance as morally irrelevant, you are left with weighing the amount of pain and suffering against the effect your donation may have. This scenario is deliberately presented in this way, because by disregarding distance as a determining factor, you can broaden your moral concern and help those who need your help more, simply because their suffering is greater. This example demonstrates how the moral irrelevance of distance allows for a more inclusive and universal approach to our moral decision-making.

Before continuing with Parfit's thoughts on temporal distance, I would like to make one comment. It seems to me that Parfit may have overlooked a dimension that also operates with distance and affects people's moral choices. What I have in mind is a kind of psychological, emotional or empirical distance. I think we can say that people generally tend to feel more deeply about things they can relate to. This may sound like a trivial statement, but I believe it is not. We can relate to situations that we either know from our own experience, or situations where we can imagine their impact on a person. If we do not have this basis for understanding

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<sup>60</sup> Ibidem, p. 114.



and judging a situation properly, I think we can say that we are simply too *distant* from it. I think great but sad examples of this are cases of rape or sexual harassment. Because the victims are usually women, and rape and sexual harassment are often trivialised, many people, mostly men, are too distant from this issue to fully grasp its significance. This is problematic because, historically, it has been mostly men who have made laws, norms and judgments about such cases, and we can see the results for ourselves. In our legal system we have a very poor and inadequate definition of what it means to rape someone. We also have one of the lowest penalties for rape, and we almost systematically shame victims.<sup>61</sup> I strongly believe that one of the main reasons why this is the case is that the people who make the decisions are too far removed from such cases to make correct ethical decisions and protocols. Rape is just one of many examples, but I believe that this can also be the case for the mistreatment of war refugees, the treatment of disabled people and so much more. Wrong and harmful decisions based on this type of distance are, in my opinion, just as irrational as those based on spatial distance and should not be forgotten. Let's now consider cases of temporal distance.

Parfit believes that temporal distance is also intertwined with the problems of moral action and choice. He shows that, from his point of view, temporal distance is just like spatial distance when he says:

*„Remoteness in time roughly correlates with a whole range of morally important facts. So does remoteness in space. Those to whom we have the greatest obligations, our own family, often live with us in the same building. We often live close to those to whom we have other special obligations, such as our clients, pupils, or patients. Most of our fellow-citizens live closer to us than most aliens. But no one suggests that, because there are such correlations, we should adopt a Spatial Discount Rate. No one thinks that we would be morally justified if we cared less about the long-range effects of our acts, at some rate of n percent per yard. The Temporal Discount Rate is, I believe, as little justified.“<sup>62</sup>*

Parfit treats temporal distance pretty much the same as spatial distance – neither should be given disproportionate weight in moral decisions. According to Parfit, it is generally

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<sup>61</sup> KOSLEROVA, Anna. ‘None of the evidence was enough’: Czech women fight to criminalise all non-consensual sex. *The Guardian* [online]. [cit. 2023-07-12]. Dostupné z: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/03/none-of-the-evidence-was-enough-czech-women-fight-to-criminalise-non-consensual-sex>

<sup>62</sup> PARFIT, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 486.

arbitrary, and morally arbitrary, to consider someone's welfare or interests as less important simply because they are physically or temporally distant from us.

Parfit goes on to support the moral irrelevance of temporal distance by showing that we can often quite easily predict the effects that our present choices and behaviours will have in the future.

*„...we ought to be equally concerned about the predictable effects of our acts whether these will occur in one, or a hundred, or a thousand years. This has great importance. Some effects are predictable even in the distant future. Nuclear wastes may be dangerous for thousands of years. And some of our acts have permanent effects. This would be so, for instance, of the destruction of a species, or of much of our environment, or of the irreplaceable parts of our cultural heritage.“<sup>63</sup>*

There is a very significant number of decisions, choices and actions that will have very predictable and also very serious effects on the future. As Parfit shows, a very good example is things that affect the environment and climate change, because we can predict those effects with a high degree of certainty and their effects are of global importance. But let's not forget that there are many other examples of foreseeable harm and suffering that may not be of global significance but will still have an impact on future individuals. This means, for example, that parents may choose not to bring a child into existence if they are not prepared to take good care of it, whatever that means, and so on.

There is, however, a significant difference between temporal and spatial distance – or perhaps in other words, between future people and distant people. In the case of future people (i.e., people of future generations), we are not just influencing the environment in which they will live, or some other state of affairs. We can directly affect the identity of the people of future generations.<sup>64</sup>

### 3.3. Future people

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<sup>63</sup> Ibidem, p. 486.

<sup>64</sup> In case it is not clear from the outline of this thesis – how exactly we are able to impact not just well-being, but also identities of future people will be dealt with in upcoming chapters about future people and The Non-Identity Problem.

*„There is another question about personal identity. Each of us might never have existed. What would have made this true? The answer produces a problem that most of us overlook. ... This is the part that covers how we affect future generations. This is the most important part of our moral theory, since the next few centuries will be the most important in human history.“<sup>65</sup>*

It is not entirely clear what leads Parfit to regard the next few centuries as the most important for humanity. He may be poking around in a number of issues that we as a human race are experiencing or will soon be experiencing. One of these issues is certainly the problem of climate change, since Parfit occasionally raises it. What is certain, however, is that Parfit believes that we should consider the impact of our present actions on future generations. And not just because we can do them harm as well as good, but also because we can directly affect their personal identity.

*„If any particular person had not been conceived when he was in fact conceived, it is in fact true that he would never have existed.“<sup>66</sup>*

Parfit basically says that each person's personal identity is constructed by a set of unique circumstances that cannot be replicated. This is called The Time-Dependence Claim. Based on this claim, for anyone who asks questions like "who would you become if your parents were different people" or "what would happen if you were born in a different part of the world, or even at a different time" Parfit has a pretty straightforward answer and that is "no one."<sup>67</sup> None of these questions make sense, according to Parfit, because if the circumstances of a person's conception were different (different parents, different time, etc.), we would not be talking about the same person. This may not be conventional, but it is not controversial.

The most difficult implication of this claim to accept is this:

*„But even if this child had been conceived only a few seconds earlier or later, it is almost certain that he would have grown from a different spermatozoon. This child would have had some but not all of my genes. Would this child have been me?“<sup>68</sup>*

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<sup>65</sup> Ibidem, p. 351.

<sup>66</sup> Ibidem, p. 351.

<sup>67</sup> Ibidem, p. 351.

<sup>68</sup> Ibidem, p. 352.

Parfit basically implies that if I had been conceived just one second later than I actually was, I would not be the same person I am now. Since even Parfit finds this far too controversial to accept, he suggests a slightly milder definition of The Time-Dependence Claim:

*"If any particular person had not been conceived within a month of the time when he was in fact conceived, he would in fact never have existed."*<sup>69</sup>

This is also the version I will be working with in this thesis.

### 3.4. Different kinds of choice

So, to sum up, we can influence the personal identities of future people and, of course, we can influence the number of future people. According to Parfit, this leaves us with different kinds of choices, as shown in the diagram below.<sup>70</sup>

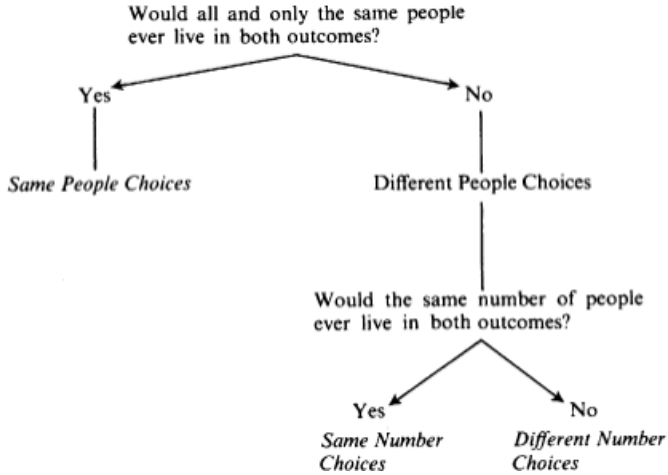


Figure 1: *Reasons and Persons*, p. 356

This diagram is used when we are considering a possible decision or action. There are always two possible scenarios. In the first we do the action, in the second we do not. When making a choice, we can always ask a question at the top of the diagram: "Would the same people ever live in both outcomes?" If the answer is "yes", then we are dealing with what are called "Same People Choices". This category applies to decisions and actions that do not affect the number of people who will live in the future. It could be something like deciding not to lie to a friend

<sup>69</sup> Ibidem, p. 352.  
<sup>70</sup> Ibidem, p. 356.

about the real reason why we cannot come to an event or something like that. Of course, any of our actions may have some unpredictable consequences, and we may never know all of them, but let's leave that aside and assume that such choices have no effect on future people. On the other hand, if the answer is "no", then we are dealing with so-called "Different People Choices". In this scenario, our decision or action has an effect on future human beings. The simplest example, but not the only one, would be the decision to have a child and when, since we already know that a person's identity depends on the time of conceiving.

On this side of the diagram, the branching continues – Parfit wants us to ask another question: "Would the same number of people ever live in both outcomes?" If the answer is "yes" we are dealing with what is known as "Same Number Choices", which means, that our decision or action does not affect the number of future people. If the answer is "No" we are, obviously, dealing with "Different Number Choices". Another simple example would be a decision not to have a child at all.

### 3.5. Why A Young Girl's Child is not benefiting anyone

In attempting to show how causing existence is beneficial to a person, Parfit presents the example of "a young girl's child". Parfit suggests that we consider a situation where a 14 year old girl decides to have a child. Because she is so young, we can predict that her child will have a very bad start in life. Nevertheless, the child's life will be worth living. If the girl had waited and decided to have a child much later, she would be able to give her child a better start in life, but that child would be a different person from the one in the first case.

As well as being a practical problem, it is also a theoretical one. Parfit wants to counter the common intuition that it would have been better for both the girl and the child if she had waited. According to Parfit, the child cannot be harmed by the girl's decision, because without it the child would never have been born. This is what Parfit calls The Non-Identity Problem and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Before I move on to The Non-Identity Problem, there is something else going on in this example. Parfit goes on:

*„We should ask, ‘If someone lives a life that is worth living, is this worse for this person than if he had never existed?’ Our answer must be No. Suppose next that we believe that causing to exist can benefit. On this view, this girl's decision benefits her child.“<sup>71</sup>*

I do not think that Parfit's argument for why it is beneficial for a person to be brought into existence (if their life is worth living) is as strong as Parfit presents it. Firstly, neither here nor later (as will be discussed in the next chapter) does Parfit propose a more precise definition of what it means for a life to be worth living. Parfit offers only a very ambiguous definition, that a life is worth living if it consists of whatever makes a life worth living. Moreover, Parfit practically does not work with the concept of a life that is *not worth living*. For Parfit, that would be a borderline state, which is quite rare. If we cannot really be sure what Parfit means by a life worth living, why should we assume that it is a benefit to anyone? Other than that, I do not think there is a connection between a life being worth living and it being of benefit to the person who lives it. I think there are many things that people would generally consider worth doing or experiencing, but that does not mean that I should do them, let alone that they must automatically be of benefit to everyone. Let's take travel, for example. Travelling is generally considered to be an experience, and it is often assumed that it is beneficial to the person who experiences it. It is not difficult to imagine a person who hates travelling and experiences a great deal of stress and discomfort when forced to do so. Would we really argue that travelling is a benefit to a person who feels this way? I do not think we would, because any possible beneficial part of the experience would be overshadowed by the amount of suffering involved. The decision as to whether a life is really worth living or not is the result of a subjective consideration by the person living it. Of course, we could probably come up with some basic guidelines that generally contribute to a life worth living. It might be things like having a good family relationship, having enough income to cover basic needs, etc. But again, these would only be some basic guidelines and never the whole picture. I think a life worth living is a much narrower category than Parfit presents, and without a more precise definition it simply does not work.

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<sup>71</sup> Ibidem, p. 359.

### 3.6. The Non-Identity Problem

The first mention of The Non-Identity Problem occurs in Parfit's article *On Doing Best for Our Children*<sup>72</sup>, while Parfit develops this concept further and returns to the concept in his other texts, namely in *Reasons and Persons*<sup>73</sup> and *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem and Person-Affecting Principles*.<sup>74</sup> This issue remains unresolved by Parfit, as the last of these articles was published as unfinished after Parfit's death.

The Non-Identity Problem raises an ethical question about the responsibilities and obligations we have towards future generations, given that future generations will exist solely on the basis of the actions and choices we make now. At the same time, however, it is precisely because of these actions and decisions that people in future generations will inevitably suffer damage that will be felt, but their lives will still be considered worth living.<sup>75</sup> If we want to avoid such a situation, we have two options before us: a) not to bring a person into the world who would later find himself in this situation, or b) to try to prevent the harm to future generations, but this would lead to different actions and decisions, and the future generation would thus consist of completely different people than in the first case. Another dimension of this problem is to consider whether it is morally wrong to bring future generations into the world knowing that their existence will be inextricably linked to some harm. Since certain individuals in the future generation would not exist without our present actions and decisions, and their lives can be considered worth living, it may seem at first glance that there is no real basis for supporting the moral wrongness of such actions. However, we can imagine cases,<sup>76</sup> where most people intuitively feel some responsibility towards future generations.<sup>77</sup>

In order to properly understand and present Parfit's Non-Identity Problem, it is important to explain some terms that Parfit uses in connection with the problem. Some of these have already been discussed briefly in various contexts. My aim in this part of the thesis is not to criticise or evaluate Parfit's justification and argumentation leading to the definition of the terms listed below, since that alone could be more than enough for another thesis.

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<sup>72</sup> PARFIT, D. (1976), "*On doing the best for our children*". In: Michael D. Bayles (ed.) *Ethics and population*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Pub. Co.

<sup>73</sup> PARFIT, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press.

<sup>74</sup> PARFIT, D. (2017), *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 45: 118-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12088>

<sup>75</sup> What does a life "worth living" mean for Parfit is shown later in this particular chapter.

<sup>76</sup> Such as for example issues of climate change.

<sup>77</sup> For example in connection with the state of the environment that we will leave for them.

The first of these concepts is what is known as the „*No Difference View*“.<sup>78</sup> The *No Difference View* is Parfit's belief that personal identity does not matter. Parfit emphasises the continuity of consciousness and mental states – leading to the counterintuitive conclusion that if two people have exactly the same memories, thoughts, etc., they are the same person, regardless of any physical differences that may exist between them. Parfit substantiates this position with thought experiments which, given the purpose of this paper, I will not discuss in detail. For The Non-Identity Problem, the *No Difference View* is an important concept, which holds that our ethical reasons for preventing harm to other people should be as strong for future people as for present people.

Another very important part of Parfit's view is the "*Time-Dependence Claim*", discussed in earlier chapters. Just to remind ourselves, it is defined by Parfit as follows: „*If any particular person had not been conceived within a month of the time when he was in fact conceived, he would in fact never have existed.*“<sup>79</sup> This means, that the identity of each individual person is shaped by a very unique set of circumstances that can never be repeated – in other words, different people come into the world with different identities, and what kind of person is brought into the world as a result depends on the moment the gametes fuse. The *Time-Dependence Claim* is the first necessary condition to be accepted in connection with The Non-Identity Problem. The other necessary conditions for accepting The Non-Identity Problem will also be discussed.

Parfit also works with the notion of "*Person-Affecting View*", which deals with what it means to cause harm to someone. Parfit defines it simply as „*It will be worse if people are affected for the worse.*“<sup>80</sup> In essence, this is copying the automatic intuition of most people - we tend to label an action or decision as morally wrong if, as a result of that action or decision, the situation of the person affected worsens. However, according to Parfit, this intuition fails in the case of The Non-Identity Problem because it is unable to deal with the specific examples of The Non-Identity Problem. This is because we cannot reasonably compare the state of a person brought into existence with the state of a person who never existed. Resolving the concept of harm is one of the main goals in the quest to approach the non-identity problematic.

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<sup>78</sup> SVĚRÁK, V. (2023), *Climate change and The Non-Identity Problem in Derek Parfit's work*. Praha. Diplomová práce. Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, Ústav filosofie a religionistiky, p. 9.

<sup>79</sup> PARFIT, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 370.

<sup>80</sup> Ibidem, p. 327.



Finally, a term that I think is necessary for a proper understanding of The Non-Identity Problem is *"life worth living"* and therefore also *"life not worth living"*. In general, Parfit believes that bringing a person into the world does no harm to that person. This will be discussed in more detail later as it is important to the topic of this paper. The concept of a life worth living, on the other hand, refers to the subsequent quality of life of the person brought into the world. This quality is determined by the amount of "happiness" a person has in life that makes life at least a better option than not being born at all. Parfit defines this very vaguely, as I pointed out earlier – we can say that a life is worth living if the amount of happiness is at least „*the amount of whatever makes life worth living*.”<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, for Parfit, life not worth living is a borderline example: if life were not worth living, the person in question would have to experience, for example, constant, debilitating pain and similar extreme cases.

In his work concerning The Non-Identity Problem in relation to the climate change, Vojtěch Svěrák recognises five conditions that must be accepted in order to accept The Non-Identity Problem.<sup>82</sup> I will now briefly present these conditions, because I think it is a very clever and accurate presentation of Parfit's thought. Most of these conditions are in some way derived from, or at least closely related to, the concepts described above. The conditions for accepting The Non-Identity Problem are as follows:

*“Future people’s existence, number, specific identity depend (are contingent) upon currently living people’s decisions and actions.*

*Common sense notion of harm, a second preliminary condition that this principle is present in ordinary moral thinking even though it does not unproblematically explain every moral case.*

*We need to accept that there could be such a thing as a life that is worth living simply in the sense that it is better than not existing at all.*

*We do not harm someone or make things worse for her if we confer on a person by an act an existence that is worth having even if it is in some way flawed.*

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<sup>81</sup> Ibidem, p. 341.

<sup>82</sup> SVĚRÁK, V. (2023), *Climate change and The Non-Identity Problem in Derek Parfit's work*. Praha. Diplomová práce. Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, Ústav filosofie a religionistiky, p. 11.

*We could compare individual lives in terms of how worth living they are. Although the comparison would never be accurate, Parfit assumes that we can say, according to quality of living or level of happiness, that some person is better off than others.*<sup>83</sup>

At this point we have described The Non-Identity Problem as Parfit presents it in *Reasons and Persons*. In *Reasons and Persons*, Parfit also lays down some foundations for the solution of this problem. As I said earlier, Parfit's next challenge is to find a principle with which he can replace the basic Person-Affecting View, since the current formulation is not sufficient to deal with the non-identity cases. He needs to find an approach that is not impersonal, which means that the person-affecting aspect of present principle needs to be retained. However, it must be wide enough to include future people. Another point made in *Reasons and Persons* on the way to a solution is that being brought into existence is a benefit. This is based on the thesis presented in one of the sections above: by causing someone to exist, we are benefiting that person, if their life is worth living. Unfortunately, Parfit does not provide a plausible solution in *Reasons and Persons*. However, he returns to this problem in his later articles. The conclusions of these articles will be shown in later upcoming chapters.

### 3.7. The Repugnant Conclusion

The so-called Repugnant Conclusion draws attention to a problem arising from population ethics. Population ethics and its issues are more relevant today than ever before, as we have to deal with many issues of global importance that fall under it. For example, obligations towards future generations, the overall quality of life, reproductive freedom, the obligation to have children, etc. The main problem that cuts across most topics in population ethics is to find an adequate moral approach to all people in their diversity, in terms of their different identities, qualities of life, opportunities, interests, and so on. This approach or theory should be able to take account of these realities without arriving at counterintuitive or repugnant conclusions. Parfit may not have been the first to come up with ideas such as his formulation of The Repugnant Conclusion, but he drew attention to its problems by showing how difficult it is to find a plausible solution to it. Parfit formulates the Repugnant Conclusion as follows:

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<sup>83</sup> Ibidem, p. 14-19.

„For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living.“<sup>84</sup>

Parfit's formulation of The Repugnant Conclusion presents a comparison of two scenarios, where in the first one we have a large population of people, who have a very high quality of life. The second scenario proposes an even larger population consisting of people with a significantly lower quality of life, than those in the first scenario. The Repugnant Conclusion leads us to a counterintuitive result, where the second scenario (larger population offering a lower quality of life to its members) can be seen as more valuable than the first. The implication is that by simply adding more people to the world, we could significantly increase the overall level of happiness, even though the individual lives of those people would be of very low quality.

The Repugnant Conclusion has significant implications for any moral theory that focuses on maximising total happiness. Not surprisingly, it criticises utilitarianism in particular. It also challenges our primary intuitions - more does not always mean better. In light of this, the idea of simply aiming to increase the total amount of pleasure or happiness seems naive and misguided. The focus needs to be on the quality of life of the individual. But, as Parfit shows, this is easier said than done. Although many philosophers, including Parfit, have tried to resolve The Repugnant Conclusion by modifying existing theories or inventing new ones, it remains an issue in current debates about the value of human life and other matters. As I mentioned earlier, Parfit himself tried to avoid The Repugnant Conclusion and I will come back to this later.

### 3.8. The search for a plausible solution

In the previous chapters I have shown the path of argumentation throughout *Reasons and Persons* that leads Parfit to his two main issues: The Non-Identity Problem and The Repugnant Conclusion. It was also shown, that in *Reasons and Persons* Parfit failed to offer a functional solution to these issues. Parfit continues to find these solutions in his later texts, namely *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*<sup>85</sup> and *Can*

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<sup>84</sup> PARFIT, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 388.

<sup>85</sup> PARFIT, D. (2017), *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 45: 118-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12088>

*We Avoid The Repugnant Conclusion?*<sup>86</sup> In this chapter I will deal with the conclusions of these articles.

The Non-Identity Problem and The Repugnant Conclusion are two separate problems, but in certain contexts they have a certain degree of connection. For example, we could imagine a society in which people are encouraged to have as many children as possible, regardless of the quality of their lives. Such a situation is very likely to result in a larger population with lives of low quality, bordering on not worth living. This would be a case of The Repugnant Conclusion. This case also raises the question of damage that our current actions and choices will do to future generations, which is a case of The Non-Identity Problem. So this is where the two intersect. This connection only highlights the challenges and overall complexity that these two issues present in terms of ethical reasoning, and that it is more than relevant to attempt a plausible solution to both.

### 3.8.1. Future generations revisited

In the chapter on The Non-Identity Problem, as presented in *Reasons and Persons*, we were left with the need to find a better principle of harm, that could include future people and with the preliminary condition, that causing someone to exist is beneficial to them, if their life is expected to be worth living. In this part of the text, I will again draw from Svěrák's thesis, since he has done a very great deal of research and reconstructed possible solutions of The Non-Identity Problem throughout Parfit's work.

In order to offer a plausible solution to the Non-Identity Problem, it is necessary to find a new way of defining a general principle of harm, since the common-sense notion of harm covered by the Person-Affecting View cannot satisfactorily cover cases of The Non-Identity Problem. This is exactly what Parfit tries to do in his final solution. The final solution is called the "*Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle*". Parfit arrived at this solution after considering many different principles, one of his main problems being to find a principle that would strike the ideal balance between quantity and quality, and between the individual and the collective. This is indicated by the fact that the final solution consists of two separate principles:

*„The Wide Collective Principle: One of two outcomes would be in one way better if this outcome would together benefit people more, by*

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<sup>86</sup> PARFIT, D. (2016), "*Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?*" *Theoria* 82, 2.

*giving people a greater total sum of benefits.*

*The Wide Individual Principle: One of two outcomes would be in one way better if this outcome would benefit each person more.*<sup>87</sup>

The announced final solution is then composed of these two separate principles:

*„Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle: One of two outcomes would be in one way better if this outcome would together benefit people more, and in another way better if this outcome would benefit each person more.”<sup>88</sup>*

In other words, the *Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle* tells us that in ethical questions we should consider equally all persons affected by our actions or decisions, whether or not they already exist. The *Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle* thus establishes a moral claim to equal consideration of the interests of living people and those of future generations in ethical decisions that affect both groups. According to Parfit, this principle therefore correlates with most people's intuition that it is morally wrong to leave a damaged environment for future generations.

Therefore, in order to accept the *Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle*, it is necessary to first accept a specific condition – the originally preliminary condition mentioned above. Parfit, and by extension Svěrák, must accept that being born is a benefit in itself, and thus give existence the status of something that is intrinsically good in and of itself – not just in comparison with something else. We can see this when Parfit says:

*"We can claim that there are existential benefits, and appeal to the Wide Principle, thereby solving The Non-Identity Problem."<sup>89</sup>*

What are existential benefits and how does Parfit defend their acceptance? In *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*, Parfit follows the arguments of

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<sup>87</sup> PARFIT, D. (2017), *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 45: 118-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12088>, p. 153.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 154.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 130.

Jeff McMahan and his article *Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives*.<sup>90</sup> Jeff McMahan is also an author who contributed to Parfit's posthumously published articles. McMahan addresses this issue and defines the benefits of existence as follows:

*"If someone is caused to exist and to have a life that is worth living, that is good for this person, giving him or her an existential benefit. There are similar existential harms."*<sup>91</sup>

Svěrák summarises McMahan's view in his thesis. Since I find his summary very well done and accurate, I will follow it in my own clarification of McMahan's position.<sup>92</sup> The first crucial point in McMahan's view of existential benefit in so-called asymmetry is as follows:

*„1) That a person would have a life that is “worth not living” – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing.*

*2) That a person would have a life worth living does not, on its own, provide a moral reason to cause that person to exist, though there is no general moral reason not to cause such a person to exist.*<sup>93</sup>

This asymmetry should basically cover people's general intuitions when we feel that it is a good reason not to have a child if its life is supposed to be filled with suffering. At the same time, we do not feel (quite rightly in my opinion) that there is anything wrong with choosing not to have a child, even if its life would presumably be worth living. The problem with asymmetry, according to McMahan, is the second premise, because it leads us to the conclusion that existence is not in itself a benefit.

We generally understand the terms "benefit" or "being better off" as something comparative. Something is better for someone than some other case; scenario A brings greater benefit to a person than scenario B. Since we cannot reasonably compare the state of being brought into existence with the state of not being born at all (in the latter case, the person in

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<sup>90</sup> McMAHAN, J. (2013), "Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives," *Journal of Ethics* 17.

<sup>91</sup> Ibidem, p. 3-7.

<sup>92</sup> SVĚRÁK, V. (2023), *Climate change and The Non-Identity Problem in Derek Parfit's work*. Praha. Diplomová práce. Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, Ústav filosofie a religionistiky, p. 51-56.

<sup>93</sup> McMahan, Jeff. "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist" In: Melinda A. Roberts, David T. Wasserman (ed.), *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics and the Nonidentity Problem* (New York: Springer, 2009), p. 49-71, p. 49.

question never existed), it is necessary to show that existence is something intrinsically good. This is where the existential benefit comes in – showing that existence is really a benefit in itself would take the comparative aspect out of the equation. This means that existential utility must arise from intrinsic personal well-being, it must be shown to be good in itself, not in comparison with another scenario. McMahan's strategy is to try to argue against existential benefit by showing that the conclusions that follow from it are hard to accept. To explain McMahan's view, Svěrák uses the example of an amputation. The situation is as follows: the patient's leg must be amputated for the sake of his survival, there is no other option. According to Svěrák, and by extension McMahan, the intuitive answer would be that amputation is beneficial for this patient, but without existential benefit we have no tools to say why this is the case. If the patient's leg were not amputated, he would die. He would become non-existent, and since we cannot reasonably compare these states, we cannot say that amputation is good because there is no alternative scenario. This is why we need the concept of existential benefit, which is by its very nature non-comparable. Even if the patient is harmed in some way by the amputation, he can continue to live a life worth living, which in itself is a benefit. In this way, McMahan seeks to weaken the second premise of the asymmetry presented above.

Although Parfit is fully aware, that a notion of existential benefit is far from being obvious, he accepts McMahan's approach and rejects the asymmetry that McMahan presents. Parfit admits that there are things that are good only in comparison (one food, sports team or holiday resort is better than another), but there are things that are intrinsically good (like friendship). Parfit believes that things in the second category are essentially non-comparable. Being born is supposed to be one of them:

*„We can be benefited by being caused to exist and to have a good and happy life, even though the alternative, in which we never existed, would not have been worse for us. These are the benefits that I am calling existential.“<sup>94</sup>*

So Parfit's conclusion is that the asymmetry should be rejected because it operates with benefits in the comparative sense and not in the sense where being brought into existence is an intrinsic benefit.

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<sup>94</sup> PARFIT, D. (2017), *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 45: 118-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12088>, p. 132.

I find this view quite problematic. Again, as mentioned above, there is a recurring problem with the notion of "lives worth living". Since one of the main examples of The Non-Identity Problem is the problem of climate change, which runs through Parfit's and Svěrák's texts, it is quite logical that they work with this term in a very general way, since they are taking in a huge mass of people and trying to assess the effects of climate change on this mass of people. What I find problematic, however, is that even in the case of individuals, they work with the concept of "life worth living" in a practically identical manner as in the case of individuals. These are two completely different things. We say that X) the life of future generations will be worth living despite climate change, and when we say Y) this person's life is worth living despite climate change. In the case of X, it is a general assessment of the impacts and living standards of a large group of people. In such a case, I think that the level of detail with which the concept of a life worth living is worked with is quite sufficient for the case at hand. However, when we consider the life of a particular individual, as in the case of Y, I do not think that their life can be approached with the same degree of generality. I will try to show this later in this chapter.

Let's look at the example of amputation, which Svěrák himself used to clarify McMahan's views. First of all, I think that this example does not prove the importance of existential benefits at all. I understand that we cannot reasonably compare the state of a person brought into existence with the state of a person who never existed. But in my view, there is no problem in comparing possible states of the patient from the amputation example. There are two options: A) the patient has his leg amputated and lives, and B) the patient keeps his leg and dies. He does not blink into non-existence, he dies. While for every person it is conceivable that he or she will be dead – it is a real possibility – it is not the same with non-existence. For an existing person his or her non-existence (not being at all) is not a possibility at all. A lot of decisions and choices operate with this possibility, and I think it is one hundred percent comparable. Non-existent people and dead people are not the same. When we talk about non-existent people, we are not talking about anyone. We cannot refer to a concrete person because there is none. We can only talk about hypothetical people and anything we say about them is just an assumption or a prediction. Since we are talking about a concrete patient and the conceivable possibility of his death, we are talking about a real person. Being alive and being dead are states that are comparable, and furthermore I think we can conclude that in some scenarios being dead is a better option for a person. I don't think it's possible to support the existence of existential benefit, because existence is not a benefit for everyone in every scenario.



For the sake of discussing life worth living, let's stay with the example of amputation for a little longer. Let's look at amputation in general, as a medical procedure performed with the aim of saving a human life. In general, we could probably say that life would be worth living after an amputation of a limb, since the amputation was presumably performed to prevent disease or infection from spreading throughout the body. However, when we consider the life of an individual, we have to take into account a much wider range of factors to be able to say whether their life is still worth living after undergoing an amputation. Irrespective of the fact that, as I said before, only the person concerned is fully capable of such consideration. Imagine, for example, professional athletes whose lives depend entirely on sport. Being an athlete is their source of income, all their relationships, whether personal or professional, are related to sport, etc. Now imagine an athlete is badly injured, gets an infection and has to have a limb amputated. In such a case, the amputation could have such a severe impact on the quality of life that it becomes not worth living, even though the amputation itself does not generally have such a severe impact on the quality of life. So again, my conclusion is that the concept of a "life worth living" is not sufficiently defined. In its current form it is not capable of covering both examples – the collective and the individual.

### 3.8.2. Repugnant conclusion revisited

Parfit tried to offer a solution to The Repugnant Conclusion in his article *Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?* In this article, he tries to show that due to qualitative differences between two populations, the comparison between them becomes imprecise. This should allow us to reject The Repugnant Conclusion while maintaining the transitivity of the term "better than".

Let me remind the basis of The Repugnant Conclusion, it says that:

*„Compared with the existence of many people who would all have some very high quality of life, there is some much larger number of people whose existence would be better, even though these people would all have lives that were barely worth living.“<sup>95</sup>*

Parfit suggests, that we consider this:<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> PARFIT, D. (2016), "Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?" *Theoria* 82, 2, p. 110.

<sup>96</sup> PARFIT, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 388.

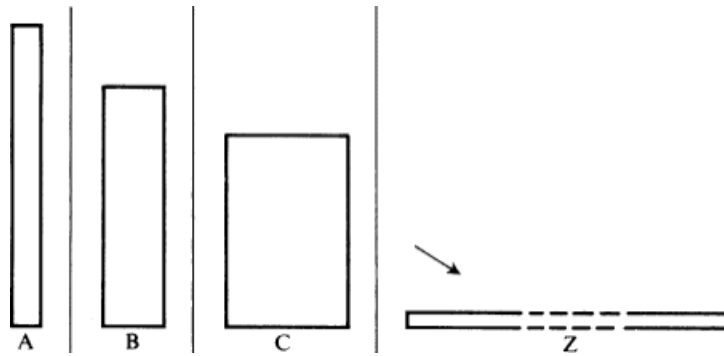


Figure 2: *Reasons and Persons*, p. 388

The width of each block represents the number of people in the population, while the height of each block represents the quality of life of the people in that population. People in population B have a slightly lower quality of life than people in population A. Population B also consists of many more people than population A. As Repugnant Conclusion suggests, population B would offer a greater amount of overall happiness than population A, even though people in population B have a lower quality of life as individuals. A similar relationship would exist between population B and C, then C and D, and so on, until we arrive at population Z, shown in the diagram. Population Z would then consist of a very large number of people whose lives would hardly be worth living. However, using the same logic, population Z would be better than the previous population Y. Since "better than" is a transitive relation, population Z would be better than any previous population, regardless of the fact that the lives of individuals in population Z would be barely worth living.<sup>97</sup>

Parfit's plan to avoid The Repugnant Conclusion is to accept the Imprecise Lexical View, which Parfit defines as follows:

*„Anyone’s existence is in itself good if this person’s life is worth living. Such goodness has non-diminishing value, so if there were more such people, the combined goodness of their existence would have no upper limit.*

*We can add:*

*If many people exist who would all have some high quality of life, that would be better than the non-existence of any number of people whose lives, though worth living, would be, in certain ways, much less good.*<sup>98</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Ibidem, paragraph 131.

<sup>98</sup> PARFIT, D. (2016), "Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?" *Theoria* 82, 2, p. 112.

The Imprecise Lexical View suggests that a significant reduction in the quality of life of individuals could possibly lead to such qualitative differences between the lives of people in population A and population Z that these populations become incomparable. That is, we could say that population A is better than population Z, while the transitive relation of "being better than" remains intact.

Parfit supports this claim by further defining what the lives of people in populations like Y and Z would really be like:

*"There would be no art, or science, no deep loves or friendships, no other achievements, such as that of bringing up our children well, and no morally good people."<sup>99</sup>*

Basically, people in these populations would be deprived of one of the best things in life, with nothing to replace it.

*"It would not be better if there existed many more people whose quality of life would all be lower, since two such worlds would at most be imprecisely equally good. Though the larger of these worlds would not be worse, this relation is not transitive. So we could claim that it would be worse if, in other, larger worlds, everyone's quality of life would be much lower."<sup>100</sup>*

According to Parfit, this qualitative shift is so significant that they are not precisely comparable, because they are based on different qualities and values.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibidem, p. 123.

<sup>100</sup> Ibidem, p. 120.

## 4. PARFIT'S AND BENATAR'S VIEWS ON WORTH OF LIFE AND STATUS OF EXISTENCE

Now that Benatar's and Parfit's views have been presented, we have enough information to find the points they have in common and to show exactly how they differ in their opinions and arguments on these points.

And this is the aim of this section of the thesis. Benatar and his critics mention Parfit in some parts of their texts, Parfit does not mention Benatar specifically, but in his later texts there are passages that can be taken as criticism of Benatar, whether it was aimed directly at him or not. This means that my aim is to identify these commonalities and to attempt to bring the two conceptions together. Based on the comparison and outline of a possible mutual discussion between the two thinkers, I will conclude what these positions say about the value of human life and whether one conception has proved more plausible than the other.

### 4.1. Key terms and concepts

#### 4.1.1. Lives worth starting, living and continuing

The first common ground between Benatar and Parfit is the definition of what it means to say that life is worth living or not, since this distinction is important to both authors. I have dealt with these definitions at length earlier in this thesis, so I will only briefly recapitulate them here.

Parfit's definition of a life worth living is very vague, since he states that for a life to be worth living, it must be filled with whatever makes a life worth living.<sup>101</sup> The concept of a life not worth living is almost alien to Parfit. He would allow such an assessment only in cases where life would be filled with constant unbearable pain or some other borderline scenario. By comparison, Benatar pays much more attention to this distinction, and it is of great importance to him. Not only does he divide life into lives worth living and lives not worth living, but he also adds two new concepts, namely lives worth starting and lives worth continuing (and their opposites, of course). Benatar claims that he uses this distinction because a notion of "life worth

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<sup>101</sup> PARFIT, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 341.

living" does not distinguish between cases of present-life and cases of future-life. For Benatar, this distinction is morally relevant and important.<sup>102</sup>

Obviously, the two approaches are very different – whereas Parfit pretty much only knows the lives that are worth living and tends to minimise the range of anything that might be considered a life not worth living, Benatar works out a detailed terminology and builds his arguments around it. Let's see what the motivations are between the two approaches.

Since Parfit needs to provide a background for claiming that coming into existence is associated with an intrinsic benefit for a person, he needs to assume that the majority of lives are really worth living. As we saw earlier, accepting the existence of existential benefit is also closely related to The Non-Identity Problem and, more importantly, to its solution. Benatar believes that when we say that a life is worth living, we can only talk about life in the present-life sense, that is, the life of a person who already exists.

I have already criticised Parfit's conception of a life worth living for its vagueness and for the breadth of the category he takes it to encompass. This is one of the reasons why I think that Benatar's view of the problem is far more plausible and better describes the real state of affairs. I think that the range of lives that are not worth living is much wider than Parfit makes it out to be, Benatar is more realistic. Benatar is also right that there is a difference between assumptions about the quality of life of people who already exist and people who may yet come. A person who already exists, even if his life contains some damage or impairment, has a greater interest in continuing his life in spite of it. The existing person has already formed relationships, may have responsibilities to other beings, and so on. We cannot say any of that about a person who does not exist. So I think the assumption that there is a morally relevant distinction between the present-life sense and the future-life sense is justified.

#### 4.1.2. Transitive and comparative nature of being "worse off" and "better off"

Another notable concept that both authors struggled with was that of being "worse off" or "better off". The main problem with these concepts is their comparative and transitive nature. Again, I will recapitulate what the problems are that both authors deal with only briefly, without

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<sup>102</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 22.

the argumentation that led them to them, since everything has already been discussed in more detail earlier in the thesis.

For Benatar, the problem he has to deal with is how to say that a person would be better off if they were never brought into existence. If a person's life is not worth living, we cannot say, that this person would be better off if they were never brought into existence, because these are not two possible states for one person. If my life is not worth living, there is no way to make it so that I never come into existence in the first place. To those who might suggest that committing suicide would be an option – suicide and never coming into existence are two very different things. But I think I may have made this a little clearer earlier in the thesis by distinguishing between never coming into existence and dying. Benatar solves this by distinguishing between present-life sense cases and future-life sense cases, as shown in earlier paragraphs. In this way he avoids comparing nonsensical pairs of cases, and only compares states that are possible for:

A) already existing person – their life is either worth living or not

B) potential non-existent person – their life can either be started or not.

In this way, the comparative nature of the terms "better off" and "worse off" no longer poses a problem for him.

Parfit's problem with comparativity and transitivity of these concepts is much bigger. He struggles with them on two fronts. First, in dealing with his Repugnant Conclusion (transitivity) and second, in attempt to prove the existence of existential benefits (comparativity).

The Repugnant Conclusion which, as we already know, is that compared to the existence of a population, whose life would have a high quality of life, there is an even larger population whose existence would probably be considered as better, despite the fact, that individual people in this population would all have lives, that are barely worth living.<sup>103</sup> This is a transitive relationship, in which the second population mentioned – population B – would be better off than the first population – population A. The same would apply to a relationship between population B and C, then C and D, and so on.<sup>104</sup> As shown in one of the earlier chapters of this

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<sup>103</sup> PARFIT, D. (2016), "Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?" *Theoria* 82, 2, p. 110.

<sup>104</sup> PARFIT, D. (1984), *Reasons and Persons*. New York: Oxford University Press, paragraph 131.

thesis *Repugnant conclusion revisited*, Parfit tried to at least minimise the wrongness of the transitive relation in this case, but he never really managed to solve it successfully.

The problem with proving existential benefits has to do with a comparative aspect of the terms "worse off" and "better off". This problem is McMahan's rather than Parfit's, but as I have noted, Parfit accepted McMahan's approach to proving existential benefit and built his statements about it on McMahan's findings. The problem faced by McMahan and by extension Parfit, is similar to Benatar's. Being "better off" is usually understood as something comparative, and so, according to McMahan, is the term "benefit".<sup>105</sup> Like Benatar, McMahan concludes that we cannot reasonably compare the state of a person who has been brought into existence with the state of a person who has not been born at all, since these are not two possible states for a person. However, McMahan's strategy is quite different from Benatar's, since he wants to solve the problem of comparability by introducing existence as something that is intrinsically good, or in other words, good in itself.<sup>106</sup> Which, according to McMahan, would lead to an existence that is, by its very nature, incomparable.

The problem of the comparative and transitive nature of these terms is not unique to Benatar, McMahan and Parfit. The impossibility of interpersonal comparison is one of the fundamental challenges that utilitarians and consequentialists must face. Basically, the problem is that it is inherently difficult, if not impossible, to reasonably compare the happiness of different individuals, and since utilitarianism takes as its goal the maximisation of total happiness, this becomes problematic.

Looking at this in more detail, the first undeniable problem is subjectivity. Happiness and well-being are subjective experiences that vary from person to person. This means that there can be no common, one-size-fits-all scale by which we can assess levels of happiness. Another problem is the incommensurability of values. People have very different value or belief systems. Moreover, I believe that people even define individual values differently, since they are abstract concepts. Some contemporary utilitarians propose different approaches to these problems, such as focusing on improving individual welfare rather than maximising overall levels of happiness. Nevertheless, the overall challenge remains.

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<sup>105</sup> McMahan, Jeff. "Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist" In: Melinda A. Roberts, David T. Wasserman (ed.), *Harming Future Persons: Ethics, Genetics and the Nonidentity Problem* (New York: Springer, 2009), p. 49-71.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 49-71.

### 4.1.3. Asymmetries

Asymmetries are, in a sense, one of the starting points for both authors. It is interesting to note that both ideas start from a similarly formed asymmetry, but in each case this asymmetry is used to achieve completely different results. These results are even contradictory. In Parfit's case, asymmetry is something that is linked to McMahan's line of reasoning towards existential benefit, which Parfit adopts to some extent. In Benatar's case, the asymmetries are at the heart of his anti-natalist position and his claim that existence is intrinsically linked to harm.

This similar asymmetry basically covers the general intuition of most people, and it is related to procreation, for both authors it says the following: if a person is expected to live a life that is not worth living, this provides a fairly strong moral reason not to bring that person into existence. On the other hand, if a person is expected to live a life that is worth living, there is generally no moral reason to bring that person into existence.

For Benatar, this is one of four other asymmetries that he believes are present in our reality and in the way people think. These four asymmetries support his asymmetry argument, which we saw earlier. This argument, just to remind us, says that while the absence of pain is good, the absence of pleasure is not bad. This means that if a person is never born, there is no person in existence who would be deprived of pleasure, whereas the absence of pain is always good, whether or not there is someone who is not affected by this good. Although asymmetry put in this way makes sense, at least to me it does, there is a problem that has already been raised – Benatar has a problem proving how a person can be "better off" if they never come into existence, since if that person never exists there is no actual subject who could benefit from never being born. As we have seen, I do not believe that Benatar has succeeded in solving this problem and thus in supporting The Asymmetry Argument.

Interestingly, McMahan, and by extension Parfit, use the very same asymmetry to build a bridge to existential benefit. McMahan sees the second premise of the asymmetry as a problem, because he believes it leads us to believe that existence itself is not a benefit.<sup>107</sup> I am not entirely sure that this conclusion really follows from the second premise. For McMahan, if existence were a benefit in itself, would we have a strong moral reason to bring people into existence whose lives would be predictably worth living? I do not see why that should be the

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<sup>107</sup> Ibidem, p. 49-71.



case. The fact that something is beneficial to someone does not create a moral obligation to do it.

I think I have just shown the main concepts that Benatar and Parfit have in common and explained how their approaches differ. That should be enough background to go through the probably most contradictory parts of both conceptions.

#### 4.2. Existential benefits and harms

I think that the clearest division and mutual criticism between Benatar and Parfit is over the status of existence. Whereas Parfit needs existence to be intrinsically a benefit in order to support his other philosophical problems, Benatar claims that existence is always a harm and thus supports his anti-natalist view.

We have seen in the chapter on Benatar that he uses The Deluded Gladness Argument to support his claim that coming into existence is always harm. Benatar generally believes that human life (and probably life in general) is filled with more pain than pleasure, and that the bad things in life always outweigh the good. The fact that people tend to value their lives more highly than he portrays life to be, Benatar links to the self-evaluation of life being deeply misguided and deluded. Having discussed this argument in more detail in earlier parts of this thesis, I believe that Benatar succeeds in showing that human life is inherently associated with a great deal of harm. I also think he manages to show that these harms can outweigh the good things in life.

Although Parfit is aware that the claim of existential benefit is not at all obvious, he accepts this notion on the basis of McMahan's work with asymmetry and his other ideas which I have already presented. Compared to Benatar, I do not think that Parfit manages to support his claim, for the reasons I have given in previous chapters. I will now present a critique of the existence of existential benefit based on Benatar's text.

Let's take a second look at Parfit's final statement about existential utility:

*„We can be benefited by being caused to exist and to have a good and happy life, even though the alternative, in which we never existed, would not have been worse for us. These are the benefits that I am calling existential.“<sup>108</sup>*

It seems that the existential benefit is linked to the fact that the person who is brought into the world will subsequently have a good life, i.e. a life worth living. So when Parfit claims that being brought into the world is an intrinsic benefit, ergo in itself, I do not think it is correct or logical to link the existential benefit of "being brought into the world" to something that comes after birth. So how can existence itself be a benefit if it is determined by whether or not a person has a life worth living? If existence really is a benefit in itself, then it should be a benefit whether a person's life is worth living or not. Moreover, causing someone to exist comes before we can know for sure that they will have a "good and happy life". So, the decision as to whether coming into existence was indeed an existential benefit for a person should be made ex post? I do not see how that could be considered plausible.

Another obvious problem is the case where a person's life would not be worth living. Although, as mentioned above, Parfit allows only a few borderline cases where life can be characterised as not worth living. If I understand his position correctly, there would be no existential benefit in this case. This is because existential utility is determined by whether a person has a "good and happy life". So, if a person's life is not worth living, we cannot talk about existential benefit. Moreover, Parfit's concept of a life not worth living is again controversial – as I said, I think it is a wider spectrum than Parfit is prepared to admit. Benatar responds to this part of Parfit's text by saying:

*„The problem is that it is implicitly assumed that there is some point, even if approximate, at which a being comes into existence in a morally relevant sense—that is, in the sense of having an interest deserving of moral consideration.“<sup>109</sup>*

Benatar alludes to the fact that Parfit links existential benefit directly to the moment of birth, while Benatar argues that it is not entirely clear when a human being exists in the sense of having moral relevance and interests to be judged, and when it exists only in an ontological sense. Benatar points out that these two states are not necessarily correlated - the moment the

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<sup>108</sup> PARFIT, D. (2017), *Future People, the Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 45: 118-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12088>, p. 132.

<sup>109</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 24-25.

gametes fuse, the human being begins to exist precisely and only in the ontological sense of the word, while moral relevance and interests emerge much later.<sup>110</sup>

*„Although most people would agree that to save my life now at the cost of my leg would confer a net benefit on me, many fewer people would think that saving the life of a conceptus at the cost of its living a life without a leg constitutes a net benefit.“<sup>111</sup>*

In other words, Benatar is saying that once we are brought into the world in terms of the moral relevance of our interests, not ontologically (which is a process that somehow takes place over a longer time horizon), we are willing to make greater and greater sacrifices in order to save our lives. For our interests in staying alive evolve and strengthen over time.<sup>112</sup>

#### 4.3. Non-identity, future people, repugnant conclusions and anti-natalism

In his book, Benatar goes through Parfit's main problems with population ethics, which were discussed in detail in the section on Parfit, namely The Repugnant Conclusion and The Non-Identity Problem. Benatar briefly gives the reader the context of the problem and then tries to show that his version of antinatalism is capable of solving these problems and some other minor problems that Parfit collected along the way. Based on citations and a year when Benatar's book was published, it is obvious that he is working with a version of these problems as described in *Reasons and Persons*.

First, Benatar tries to show how his arguments might solve The Non-Identity Problem. One of the ways that Benatar suggests would be to say that coming into existence can be worse for a person than never existing. But I think this would not hold up against Parfit, because for him the category of life that is not worth living is so narrow, however problematic that may be. Benatar also offers an alternative, more conciliatory approach when he says:

*„Alternatively, I argued, we can say that even if coming into existence is not worse, it may still be bad for the person who comes into existence. Since the alternative is not bad we can say that the person is thereby harmed.“<sup>113</sup>*

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<sup>110</sup> Benatar přesný bod kdy se tak stane nedefinuje a odvolává se na bohatou zásobu literatury, která tuto roblematiku řeší v souvislosti s potraty.

<sup>111</sup> Ibidem, p. 25.

<sup>112</sup> Ibidem, p. 26.

<sup>113</sup> Ibidem, p. 173.

The problem with this is that since Parfit believes in existential benefit, it is hard to imagine that he would feel comfortable saying that coming into existence is bad for a person. It is also suggested by Parfit's way of defining lives worth living and lives not worth living. However problematic that definition is. This is something that I think Parfit criticises in his article *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*, although he does not mention Benatar directly.

Parfit suggests an example:

*„Sam will exist and have fifty years of suffering”<sup>114</sup>*

*or*

*Sam will never exist.”<sup>115</sup>*

The first claim, that Parfit makes is that *“If Sam had never existed, there would not have been a Sam for whom his non-existence would have been better.”<sup>116</sup>* And so Parfit's rejects Benatar's first attempt at solving The Non-Identity Problem (by admitting the possibility that being brought into existence is worse than never having existed). We already know that Benatar struggles with this idea and that it is a great challenge for his Asymmetry Argument.

Parfit suggests another claim:

*“...it would be worse if Sam exists and has this wretched life because Sam's life would be bad for him, and his non-existence would not have been bad for him.”<sup>117</sup>*

This is exactly what Benatar proposes as an alternative solution. Parfit again disagrees. He claims that by saying this we are not comparing the states in which Sam exists and the states in which he never existed. We are simply saying that *“being in a state that is bad, is worse than not being in any bad state.”<sup>118</sup>* This is not enough for Parfit. He claims that the damage to Sam's life (fifty years of suffering) is intrinsic, which makes it essentially non-comparable.

In this case, I do not think that Parfit has successfully stood up to Benatar. I believe that Benatar is really making the simple claim that Parfit has pointed out – that suffering severe harm is worse than not being in any state at all. I also think that Sam's situation is comparable.

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<sup>114</sup> Here it is clearly shown, how bad a life would have to be for Parfit to even consider it not to be worth living.

<sup>115</sup> PARFIT, D. (2017), *Future People, The Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles*. Philosophy & Public Affairs, 45: 118-157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12088>, p. 132.

<sup>116</sup> Ibidem, p. 133.

<sup>117</sup> Ibidem, p. 133.

<sup>118</sup> Ibidem, p. 133.

Because whatever the nature of the harms, they are severe and they make Sam's life unbearable. To argue that it is not better to be in a state of nothingness than in a state of omnipresent long-term damage does not sound very plausible. It also goes against the grain of human behaviour. Euthanasia or even suicide are very real things that happen in human life, and I think that their mere existence (not in all cases, of course) only proves that there are conditions where being in a bad state is worse than not being in any state at all.

Benatar also believes that his arguments can prevent The Repugnant Conclusion and avoid problems that arise from the mere addition of people in general. Firstly, Benatar states that *"is even more repugnant on my view than it is on the view that, all things being equal, it is good to have extra lives."*<sup>119</sup> The reason for this statement is quite simple. Since Benatar believes that coming into existence is always a harm, the mere addition of people only maximises the total harm, especially if their lives are barely worth living. He does not stop there, claiming: *"The more populous world with poorer quality lives is, in every way, worse than the less populous world with better quality lives."*<sup>120</sup> And frankly, I do not think there is anything that can be said against it. We can already see some very bad effects that overpopulation has on our planet, on the environment and on life in general. In a way, this is nothing more than choosing quality over quantity, which, at least in this case, is what we should be doing. Probably the biggest implication of Benatar's critique is aimed at the impersonality of Parfit's approach. The aim should not be to maximise total happiness. What is the point of having a high level of overall happiness if no one is really happy? Benatar suggests an alternative approach when he says:

*"One way in which this can be done is to restrict the scope of the impersonal total view in such a way that it applies only to people who do exist or will anyway exist and not to question about how many people should exist. In other words, it can be seen as a principle to maximize the happiness of the existent, but not to affect the number of existers."*<sup>121</sup>

That makes much more sense to me. I think it has been shown that maximising overall happiness is not beneficial to people as individuals. Benatar's approach makes more sense. It is about improving the lives of real people, not statistics. There is another possible solution that Benatar suggests:

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<sup>119</sup> BENATAR, David (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. New York; Oxford University Press, p. 174.

<sup>120</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.

<sup>121</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.

*"Under this revision, the impersonal views seek not the greatest total or average happiness but rather the smallest total or average unhappiness. In other words, the revised impersonal views seek to minimize the total or average unhappiness."<sup>122</sup>*

Again, this solution seems plausible and intuitive. Reducing the total amount of unhappiness would probably produce far more plausible results than maximising the total amount of happiness. The problem is what this means for Benatar. Since Benatar promotes the idea that coming into existence is always a harm, the ideal conclusion of this revised approach would be to get to a population where everyone eventually dies out (at least I assume, since we know that Benatar does not promote suicide). This is probably an undesirable outcome for most people. However, if we reject Benatar's view of existence, I believe that this solution may be plausible and that it could at least significantly weaken the implications of The Repugnant Conclusion.

In his article *Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?* Parfit tries to defend, that huge numbers of people, even though their lives are barely worth living, still have a great value, when he says: *"Many people underestimate what natural selection can achieve during millions of years."<sup>123</sup>* This may not be a direct criticism of Benatar, but it is again a very impersonal point of view. Of course, it is a fact that natural selection and evolution happen over billions rather than tens or thousands, but I don't think this is a way of defending a population made up of tonnes of miserable people. This statement almost seems to suggest that a human life should be seen as a mere means to an end that none of us will ever see, and which may not even end in anything we would want. Natural selection has made many species extinct.

In one of the previous chapters I showed how Parfit tried to minimise the impact of The Repugnant Conclusion by using the Imprecise Lexical View. He concluded that the qualitative differences between the populations with which The Repugnant Conclusion deals are so great that we cannot reasonably compare them. I think that Parfit's attempt at a solution is much worse than Benatar's. That is, because it solves nothing, Parfit just tries to get out of the problem on a technicality.

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<sup>122</sup> Ibidem, p. 175.

<sup>123</sup> PARFIT, D. (2016), *"Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?"* Theoria 82, 2, p. 111.

#### 4.4. What does they say about existence and the value of human life?

Parfit's and Benatar's approaches to existence, the value of human life, population ethics and ethics in general are very different, even though they have a lot of common points, terminology and foundations, as I have shown. What I think is most interesting is that even though Benatar wants people not to procreate, his approach is much more humane than Parfit's. I think that Parfit's impersonal approach may have its origins in his notion of personal identity. According to Parfit, personal identity is not about the persistence of a particular self, but rather a matter of psychological continuity and connectedness. This perspective has implications for how we understand the value of human life, as it shifts the focus from the preservation of a particular individual to the continuity of experiences and psychological states. By exploring rational and impartial reasons for action, he seeks to find the background to ethical principles in a way that does not rely on subjective preferences. It is somehow obvious that it is a real challenge for him to include people as individuals, although he has tried to do so through the use of The Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle and in his attempts to minimise the impact of The Repugnant Conclusion. While the life of an individual does not seem to have much value in Parfit's eyes, he promotes existence as intrinsically good. Parfit believes that existence is an intrinsic good for a person.

Benatar, on the other hand, argues that existence has an inherently negative value. Benatar claims that all sentient beings experience various forms of harm and suffering that are inseparable from life. He believes that these negative aspects of existence outweigh any pleasures or positives, resulting in an overall negative value of life. All of this leads him to suggest that it is morally preferable to refrain from having children, as this prevents the imposition of inevitable suffering on potential individuals. As for existing individuals, he argues that we should not harm them, and often seems to advocate making their lives as good as possible. It is also worth to mention that, apart from Parfit, his views are less impersonal and more inclined towards dealing with individuals.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In my thesis I explored the problematic of the value of human life and the status of human existence. In order to do this, I reconstructed the views of two authors who have very different, perhaps even contradictory, views on this problematic, since one of the authors promotes existential benefit and the other associates existence with an inherent harm. The aim of my project was to show that it is not possible to accept a positive value of existence without having solid arguments to support it. I also wanted to show the consequences of allowing the notion of negative value of existence and human life. I think I have shown all this, and also that any evaluation of human existence will not work without solid argumentation, and that this is not a trivial claim.

Firstly, I introduced the anti-natalist position of David Benatar by describing the terminology he uses, clarifying the context, and presenting his main arguments for his claims. Secondly, I applied the same approach to Derek Parfit's position. I have also presented some of the criticisms of both positions, both my own and those of others.

In the last section I presented the common terminology and the differences in its interpretation. Then I went through the points that dealt with similar problems but with different results, and again tried to point out the similarities and differences. I presented a possible dialogue between the two authors, based on actual or implicit mutual criticism. Finally, I summarised and evaluated what we have learned from both authors about the status of existence and the value of human life.

My conclusion from this project is that the true evaluation of the value of human life and human existence does not lie in any of the extremes presented. I believe that we cannot view existence as either positive or negative in itself. I believe that Benatar has succeeded in showing that existence is indeed inherently connected to some harm, and that this harm can indeed outweigh the good in life. On the other hand, I do not think it is possible to claim that every life is like this.

Parfit failed, in my opinion, to defend existential utility. Nor did he show that the vast majority of lives are, or would be, worth living. However, The Non-Identity Problem has shown that we need to keep in mind how our choices and actions matter, and how they can directly affect the lives of people to come. Perhaps if we were more mindful of this, we could eliminate



some of the harms that Benatar suggested, and thus make human existence tilt towards positive value.

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