



## The Harms of Existence: A Review of David Benatar, *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*

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Life is bad, but neither death nor immortality is a solution; this is what David Benatar, a philosophy professor at the University of Cape Town in South Africa, argues in his latest book, *The Human Predicament*. Benatar is best known for his work on antinatalism, a philosophical position that regards procreation as morally indefensible because it produces “centers of suffering” (e.g., Benatar 2006). His most recent book describes what he calls “the human predicament”: once one exists, life will be bad, but death is often worse. Thus, existence inevitably leads to suffering. Benatar suggests that a pessimistic perspective on human existence is more realistic and appropriate than an optimistic perspective. He clearly describes, however, that pessimism is *not* synonymous with nihilism, a philosophical position that suggests that life is utterly meaningless. Benatar artfully weaves through topics such as meaning, meaninglessness, quality of life, death, suicide, and immortality to articulate the human predicament. Benatar’s writing style is accessible to readers with little philosophical background or experience; having a sincere interest in contemplating existence and death is sufficient.

To eliminate semantic and definitional distractions, Benatar explains that when people question whether they have a meaningful life, they are asking “whether our lives are significant, whether they have import, or whether they have some purpose” (p. 17). Although “significance,” “importance,” and “purpose” do not have precisely the same meanings, Benatar suggests that a confluence of these features describes a meaningful life, at least for descriptive purposes. Benatar clearly conveys his conviction that humans cannot achieve any sort of *cosmically* meaningful life; the universe is indifferent to human existence. Perhaps surprisingly, however, Benatar argues that humans can obtain

*terrestrial* meaning, which refers to limited but achievable meaning in this life (e.g., through individual and group/community interactions or across humanity). One could complete vocational goals set for oneself or provide comfort to family members, for example. Only rarely can an individual achieve meaning *sub specie humanitatis*, or “global” meaning, in which one makes an impact on all of humanity (e.g., Einstein, Darwin, and Shakespeare). These terrestrial instances of meaning do not distract from Benatar’s main point: humans desire cosmic meaning, but this is not possible. Cosmic meaning is more expansive than terrestrial meaning and humans wish to be and feel more important than they are or can be. Benatar argues that, *objectively*, humans are insignificant in the grand scheme of the universe, regardless of whether we personally feel *subjective* meaning. Although terrestrial meaning can be good, it will eventually cease because all humans inevitably die. Terrestrial meaning is also severely limited because it can never be as expansive or as satisfying as the never-to-be-obtained but ever-sought-for cosmic meaning. Life cannot be as meaningful as individuals wish, if this wish refers to cosmic meaningfulness.

Transitioning to the meaninglessness of human life, Benatar notes that humans evolved by natural selection, an unguided, purposeless, and uncaring process, thereby aligning his philosophical perspective with evolutionary science. Benatar provides a devastating dismantling of theistic arguments for cosmic meaning. Theistic accounts of life’s meaning center around god-bestowed purpose, and Benatar provides a satisfying presentation of the circularity of this perspective: “Even in the best-case scenario, it is hard to understand why God would create a being in order to prepare it for an afterlife, given that no afterlife would be needed or desired if the being had not been created in the first place” (p. 39). Given that humans (and all other species) have evolved by a meaningless process, religious arguments do not provide a foothold for universal meaning. Benatar remains intellectually honest and consistent in extending his argument to secular perspectives on meaning. Benatar suggests that secular interpretations of meaning are often equally confused and empty. For instance,

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atheists might agree with Dawkins's (2006) claims that evolution by natural selection is beautiful and that humans are lucky to exist. Benatar argues, however, that secular perspectives that claim that life is inherently valuable and thus universally meaningful are naive and ignore reality. He forces readers to confront their biases, be they secular or religious. Religiously inclined readers may begin to question theistic interpretations of purpose, whereas secular readers are guided to think skeptically about optimistic perspectives of life.

Benatar compassionately addresses the dismal quality of human life. He argues that most humans incorrectly perceive the quality of their lives—most believe that life is better than it actually is. Psychological research supports Benatar's argument. An "optimism bias" occurs when an individual perceives circumstances more favorably than they actually are (Sharot 2011). Humans often judge negative or neutral events in positive terms, especially in hindsight. Sharot (2011) argues that this optimism bias may be the product of evolved psychology (e.g., encouraging an individual to marry, have children, and otherwise continue striving to achieve desired outcomes and goals). Benatar concedes that this optimism bias may alleviate some suffering. According to Benatar, however, this bias does not eliminate or extract one from the human predicament. Life is objectively bad, even if one perceives it favorably. To persuade the reader of this point, Benatar argues that persistent and pervasive struggles with hunger, disease, mental anguish, pain, and social problems (to name a few) are evidence of the deplorable quality of life. No matter how good certain pleasures are, pains are more enduring and impactful.

Having defended a pessimistic perspective on existence, one might expect that Benatar would suggest that death resolves the sufferings of life. This expectation would be wrong. According to Benatar, life is bad, but so is death. He articulates a compassionate perspective on death, one that is nevertheless deeply pessimistic. In detailing his perspective on death, Benatar addresses other philosophical arguments about death, which he dismantles or assimilates into his perspective. The deprivation account of death, for example, posits that death is bad because it denies the individual who has died the future goods that may have been secured if life had continued (e.g., death occurs before reaching a desired goal). Benatar argues that this deprivation account is incomplete. He adds another component: annihilation. "Death is bad not merely because it deprives one of the future good that one would otherwise have had, but also because it *obliterates* one" (p. 102–103; italics in original). Although life is bad, death is often worse because it deprives *and* annihilates, exemplifying a feature of the human predicament. Benatar effectively explains why death is bad for an individual, even though in death, they eternally cease to exist, which, according to alternative perspectives, is not bad. Benatar disagrees. Additionally, Benatar suggests that evolutionary psychology may account for human aversion to or anxiety about death. Humans typically do not want to die,

even if life is bedeviled with suffering. In fact, risk aversion research suggests that our ancestors are those individuals that avoided risky situations or behaviors and, therefore, were more likely to survive to reproduce than conspecifics who took more risks and perhaps were less fearful or anxious about death (Levy 2015). Although this evolved desire to avoid lethal risks may have been ancestrally adaptive, it does not diminish the severity of the human predicament. Humans who successfully (albeit temporarily) avoid death thereby are assured to extend their suffering and those who die sooner rather than later are thereby deprived of future goods they might otherwise have secured and are annihilated sooner rather than later. Either way, existence leads unequivocally and irrevocably to bad outcomes.

Considering that suicide is one way of achieving death, it should not be surprising to the reader, at this point now nearing the end of the book, that Benatar argues that suicide is not a solution to the human predicament. In some cases, however, when the quality of life is so low that death is not as bad as continued living, suicide may be appropriate and defensible. This is Benatar's qualified defense of suicide. Benatar is sensitive in explaining that his argument should not be taken lightly by the reader. He is not attempting to convince any reader to suicide. Instead, Benatar recognizes some "highly qualified" (p. 165) instances in which suicide might be an understandable response to unmitigated suffering. Some researchers have argued that there are circumstances in which suicide may have been ancestrally adaptive. For example, de Catanzaro (1991) provides evidence that suicide is most likely to occur when an individual inhabits circumstances in which net contributions to ancestral inclusive fitness are unlikely. According to de Catanzaro, when opportunities for reproduction are dismal, it may ancestrally have benefitted genetic kin if that individual suicided. More resources could then be dedicated to surviving kin who carry copies of the suicide's genes.

Benatar addresses immortality to elaborate on the human predicament. He uses a discussion of immortality to highlight issues of mortality—notably, the fact that death is an unavoidable fate that evokes fear or anxiety in many humans. Benatar discusses several delusional perspectives on mortality, including the denial of mortality and the rejection of mortality. He, again, dismantles *both* theistic and secular arguments about immortality, remaining honest and consistent. According to Benatar, optimistic theistic beliefs in an immortal soul, although comforting, are baseless and derive from wishful thinking. On the other hand, optimistic secular beliefs about immortality, often facilitated by an overestimation of scientific progress, ignore sundry negative implications and consequences of eternal (or very much extended) life. Benatar notes that true immortality (i.e., one cannot die in any circumstance, ever) is not possible, but engages the topic to show the reader how bad life is and would be, even if, hypothetically, we could

live forever. He argues that immortality is bad because it would extend the sufferings of life (e.g., experiencing the deaths of friends and family members). Benatar contends, however, that the *option* of immortality would be as bad as compulsory immortality because it does not solve the human predicament: an *eternally* bad life is still a bad life.

In a previous work, Benatar (2006) suggests that abstaining from procreation is morally requisite given the human predicament. Throughout *The Human Predicament*, this antinatalist perspective is enriched and corroborated. Although Benatar does not discuss at length abstaining from procreation until the final chapter, he subtly encourages the reader throughout to consider the net negative consequences of bringing an individual into existence by presenting evidence for the low quality of life and the inevitable harms of death. Unfortunately, humans are motivated by powerful evolved mechanisms that facilitate reproduction; widespread antinatalism is unlikely. Benatar argues that whether humans collectively decide to stop reproducing (he is not optimistic on this count), human extinction is inevitable and all instances of terrestrial meaning will eventually disappear.

In sum, Benatar's central thesis is that once we are brought into existence, neither continued life nor death can resolve the

human predicament described by our cosmic meaninglessness, low quality of life, and inevitable suffering. Human life is bad, but death is often worse, leaving us in a Catch-22 once we exist. Throughout the book, Benatar eloquently argues that pessimism is realism and he constructs sturdy bridges between his philosophical stance and psychological science, making frequent reference to the results of empirical research to support his argument. Benatar thoughtfully concludes the book with a clear suggestion for how we, as individuals, might best respond to the human predicament: do not procreate.

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