

Letters

The “wisdom” of Silenus

To the Editors:

My attention has been drawn to your opinionated reference (Notes & Comments, January 2008) to my book, *Better Never to Have Been*. You praise those, into whose camp you seem to fall, who reject the book without even reading it. You describe this as the “high road.” In justifying this conclusion you refer approvingly to Friedrich Nietzsche’s dictum that one does not “refute a disease.” It just so happens that your piece of rhetoric is itself an intellectual disease. I can and shall do you the courtesy of refuting it, because, contrary to Herr Nietzsche, refutation is the cure (for those who are not terminally afflicted).

Your argument takes the following form:

1. Take some view one dislikes (or, at least, one thinks one dislikes, for without reading what the view actually is one cannot be sure.)
2. Label that view a “disease.”
3. Appeal (selectively) to an authority who pronounces that we do not refute a disease.
4. Conclude, that the view may be dismissed without refutation.

Notice that this argument can be leveled against any view, including all of yours. Your argument begs the question. It assumes that the view in question is false in order to avoid having to show why one thinks it is. It also equivocates. Views are not diseases in anything other than a metaphorical sense. While one does not refute actual diseases, one does (if one can) refute “diseased” views and arguments.

Had you bothered to read my book before blustering about it, you would have noticed that I do explain, at length, what words like “harm” and “better” mean. I also show that valuing existing life, something that sets me apart from the suicide bombers and disturbed teenagers with whom you are so keen to lump me, does not entail creating new life. You would also have noticed that my arguments are not motivated by “environmental” concerns (even though they are compatible with them) and are certainly not “nihilistic.” Indeed, my argument shows that a commitment to values almost all of us share leads to a conclusion only a few recognize.

“Reason,” you say, “is profitably employed only among the reasonable.” I am to be found among the ranks of the reasonable because I accept and reject views based on reason. It remains to be seen whether the same could still be said of you, or whether you are only interested in “grandstanding.”

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The Editors reply:

Professor Benatar thinks you’d be better off dead and, goodness, he has *arguments* to tell you why (“at length,” too). Now, you might send \$55 to Oxford University Press for *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Or you might spend the afternoon in a dark closet banging your head on the floor. Which would be more profitable? In Evelyn Waugh’s novella *Love Among the Ruins*, Miles Plastic snags a plum position in the Department of Euthanasia (“Great State,” says an envious friend, “You *must* have pull. Only the bright boys get posted to Euthanasia.”). Waugh subtitled his satire “A Romance of the Near Future.” We wonder if he suspected just how near that future would be?