

ETHICAL UNTHINKABILITIES AND PHILOSOPHICAL SERIOUSNESS

SAMI PIHLSTRÖM

Abstract: This article defends a controversial metaphilosophical thesis: it is not immediately obvious that “the best argument wins” in philosophy. Certain philosophical views, for example, extremely controversial ethical positions, may be intolerable and impossible to take seriously as contributions to ethical discussion, irrespective of their argumentative merits. As a case study of this metaphilosophical issue, the article discusses David Benatar’s recent thesis that it is, for everyone, harmful to exist. It is argued that ethical and cultural “unthinkabilities” set limits to philosophical reasoning that even the most insightful arguments cannot transcend.

Keywords: argumentation, death, ethics, existence, life, unthinkabilities.

Introduction

When a mentally disturbed teenager shot nine people and finally himself at Jokela High School in Finland in November 2007—apparently imitating the famous school shootings at Columbine High School in the United States—and when he was in turn imitated by another school shooter at another small Finnish town, Kauhajoki, in September 2008, a lively debate ensued in the Finnish media over the possible role played by philosophy in these tragic events. Some people suggested that having been exposed, at school, to Friedrich Nietzsche’s somewhat misanthropic ideas, or even to Plato’s *Republic* and its antidemocratic views, might have caused these young men’s hatred toward humanity. Philosophy, it was argued, may be *dangerous* to the young—and thereby potentially to everyone. Others, of course, resisted these suggestions, defending Plato and Nietzsche, and their place in the school curriculum.

I am not going to argue for or against Nietzsche (or Plato) in this article. Nor am I willing to speculate about school shooters’ bizarre pseudophilosophical ideas. I want to examine the metaphilosophical question of whether some philosophical views might be dangerous or culturally harmful, even to the extent that there might be good reasons for ethically responsible thinkers to ignore them, that is, to refuse to tolerate them or even to discuss them philosophically. This issue requires

extremely subtle treatment in a political context in which the freedom of speech is an inviolable right—a crucial political right that, obviously, I am *not* questioning here—and responsible thinkers are expected to defend their ideas in public discussion by means of arguments whose credentials can be relatively objectively evaluated. In philosophy, in particular, we are accustomed to thinking that *anything* can be seriously put forward as a philosophical view or thesis, and that it will then be up to the arguments to decide the matter. There is hardly any philosophical view so crazy that it has never been propounded by anyone, as has famously been remarked.¹ And there is hardly any philosophical view so crazy that no arguments at all could be found to support it.

We are, moreover, accustomed to thinking that the best argument wins. Philosophy is an argumentative game; this, indeed, is what we philosophy professors teach to our students (and are expected to do so). However, sometimes—especially when people put forward, and argue for, views that are *ethically intolerable*, whether or not they lead to school shootings or other mass murders—it might be argued, at a metalevel, that argumentation is *not* the only game in town. Perhaps there are ideas that are dangerous enough not to deserve serious argumentative attention. Perhaps there are philosophical ideas and arguments that *ought to be left aside* precisely because they violate some human values and ideals that are cherished more deeply than the ideal of sound argument itself. (In suggesting that this might be the case, I am, to be sure, arguing. We will see, I hope toward the end of this essay, how far my argument reaches.)

I will examine, as a case study, a particularly challenging philosophical thesis and the arguments supposedly supporting it, namely, David Benatar's recent book *Better Never to Have Been* (2008), constituting an argument to the effect that it is, for sentient beings like humans, always harmful to exist. It is through this example—a very good example directly leading to the metaphilosophical problems I want to take up—that I will examine the question of whether we should always follow the best argument, wherever it leads. My main goal is not simply to dispute Benatar's view, which is in my view too far off the humanly possible moral scale even to be seriously disagreed with. More precisely, I cannot find myself disagreeing with Benatar, because I would have to share a sufficient common ground with him in order to be able either to agree or to disagree. His position, for me, is not a "genuine option" (to use a term coined by William James)—not a candidate for acceptance—and therefore I can neither accept nor (reasonably) reject it. The bulk of this article consists of a meditation on why this is the case and on what follows.

¹ Just think about the claims that there is no external world independently of my mind (solipsism), that we know nothing or have no justified beliefs (global skepticism), that no word has a definite meaning (meaning skepticism), that all ethical statements are false ("error theory"), and so forth.

My main target is, accordingly, to use this special case to enlighten the issue of whether argumentation is the most important thing in (moral) philosophy. In addition to arguments, we need, I will suggest, a culturally sensitive study of what we, within our form(s) of life, are able to regard as seriously thinkable and what we must ignore as an “ethical unthinkability” defining the limits of the form of life that makes it possible for us to think about ethical matters at all. This discussion, I hope, will also lead us to appreciate the moral demand that truly serious philosophizing should not only be argumentatively and intellectually skillful but also be a humanly, or even existentially, *honest* activity.² There is a peculiar kind of *dishonesty* (hardly intended but nevertheless implied) in arguments like Benatar’s. I will try to show this by means of an argument that I am willing to describe as *transcendental*, locating a fatal self-reflective problem in Benatar’s approach (and, by implication, analogous ones).³

Although I am sharply opposed to his approach, and thereby his way of doing philosophy, Benatar touches a philosophical issue of great human significance, both ethical and metaphysical. (This, admittedly, is to his merit.) Ultimately, by discussing this issue, we will be led to question the standard order of these philosophical disciplines. Contra Benatar and many others, I suggest that we should *not* seek to first settle the metaphysical ideas (e.g., about personhood, sentiency, and so on) and only afterward take a look at what follows at the ethical level. On the contrary, our inquiry into what it is like for us to be, or exist, at all as the kind of beings we are is *all the way from the start ethically loaded*.⁴ Therefore we cannot accept Benatar’s conclusions, or his approach. Or, better, we cannot even seriously start considering whether they would merit our acceptance.

Benatar’s Arguments and Their Problems

It would be impossible to summarize all the arguments Benatar carefully puts forward to support his views. I will remain at a relatively general level, explaining his basic position. I must, for instance, ignore the metaphysical complications of his ideas, having to do with the notion of “possible people.” Wisely enough, Benatar avoids Meinongian overpopulated metaphysics by refusing to claim that “the never-existent are literally better off”; the claim is just that “coming into existence is always bad for those who come into existence” (Benatar 2008, 4). “There clearly are not any never-existent people,” he notes (2008, 4). Well, David Lewis (1986) might dispute this, though less wildly speculative metaphysics of

² See, e.g., Stenlund 2009.

³ For further recent (quite different) discussions of the relevance of transcendental argumentation in (meta)ethics, see Illies 2003; Pihlström 2005, 2007.

⁴ This metaphilosophical view, the entanglement of the ethical and the metaphysical, cannot be developed in this essay in any detail, though. Cf. Pihlström 2009.

modalities probably wouldn't. In the Lewisian concretely existing possible worlds, there definitely are people who from the perspective of our actual world are merely possible. But then again, it is unclear whether those merely possible people would really be better off in the worlds they live in. If Lewis were right, there might also be worlds in which every sentient being is completely happy. On the other hand, combining Lewis's (incredible) view that all possible worlds exist and actuality is merely indexical with Benatar's conception of the harmfulness of existence might even yield the absurd conclusion that even possible existence, because actual in some world, is harmful. Only "impossible people" existing in no possible world would then, *per impossibile*, be well off. (Are there *such* entities in any sense?) Accordingly, Benatar's thesis of the harmfulness of existence must be restricted to the actual, empirical world we do exist in.

Let us thus focus on the relevance of his argument to how we (may) view the tasks of moral philosophy. By arguing that "coming into existence is always a serious harm" (2008, 1), Benatar turns the traditional "evil of death" discussion upside down. Philosophers have, since Epicurus, been interested in the question of whether death is bad for us.⁵ Now Benatar tells us that it is not death that is bad for us but life—or, more precisely, birth, one's coming to have a life, coming into existence. According to Benatar, we always seriously harm people by bringing them into existence (2008, 2). The basic argument is simple: those who do not exist do not suffer any harm, while those who do exist can suffer (and they will, at least, eventually suffer from the harm of having to die); we cannot say that nonexistence harms the one who does not exist, while we can say that the many sufferings of life—all of which can never be avoided by anyone who exists—harm the ones who do. Relying on this asymmetry of the harmfulness of suffering and the nonharmfulness of nonexistence, Benatar arrives at his devastating conclusions. All of us would be better off had we not been born, and it is a duty not to bring any new children, new people, into the world.⁶ It would be a good thing if fetuses were aborted at an early stage (and according to Benatar, we even have a moral obligation to do so, though not a legal one), and it would also be a good thing if the human species became extinct, sooner rather than later.⁷

One way of observing the basic problem with Benatar's discussion is by noting that his text is replete with economic metaphors. Coming into existence, he says, constitutes a "net harm" rather than a "net benefit" (2008, 1); sentient existence comes "at a significant cost" (2008, 2); "coming into existence is never worth its costs" (2008, 13). It is as if we

⁵ See, e.g., the papers pro and contra Epicureanism in Fischer 1993. Benatar considers the Epicurean controversy in his final chapter (2008, 213–21).

⁶ This argument is developed at greater length in chapters 3 and 4 of Benatar 2008.

⁷ See the latter parts of Benatar's volume, especially chapters 5 and 6, for the development of these wildly counterintuitive arguments.

“bought” something, existence, by paying a price—too high a price, according to Benatar. He even playfully speaks about “kilo units” of positive and negative value (2008, 63). But this is *not* the way we ordinarily think about our lives. We are not bought and sold; we do not have a price.⁸ Insofar as we reject Benatar’s basic picture of the intrinsic harmfulness of existence as *inhuman*, we also have good reasons to reject the very economic discourse he employs (even though he, admittedly, employs it more or less metaphorically—perhaps without fully recognizing how important such metaphors are to how we view our lives). We may be well advised to reject such metaphors even in contexts in which they do not explicitly lead to as radical reductions of the value of human life as they do in the present one.

The problems with Benatar’s position are not restricted to his use of economic discourse. His difficulties lie at a very deep, reflexive level—at a transcendental level, I would say. Consider, for example, his way of defending (perceptively, I must admit) immigration in contrast to procreation. “Should somebody’s freedom to create a person be more inviolable than somebody else’s freedom to have a friend or family member immigrate?” he asks (2008, 12). I agree that there is an important political issue here. However, Benatar’s appeal to friendship is curious (to say the least) in this context. In his ideal world, there would be no human beings—or even no sentient beings. If one seriously adopts such an ideal, seeking to promote it by means of philosophical argumentation, it is highly unclear and, I believe, unlikely that one can coherently make sense of the very idea of friendship. The notion of friendship is applicable in a world in which people care about each other’s lives. In a world from which we could seriously hope everybody would disappear, including ourselves and the people nearest to us, there would be little room for anything like friendship as we know it in and through our actual lives in *this* world—or for any concern with people’s rights to immigrate, for that matter. Benatar’s way of appealing to friendship is thus merely a rhetorical move in his argument. The argument itself may be worth considering further, though; by no means is immigration an easy political issue.

Benatar’s difficulties are certainly not restricted to an isolated example like the one of friendship and immigration. In his introductory chapter, Benatar says: “Sound though I believe my argument to be, I cannot but hope that I am wrong” (2008, 13). This is a revealing statement. It may *seem* that Benatar honestly hopes he is wrong. But if he really does hope so, it is not clear why he even presents the argument he does. If he

⁸ From a Kantian point of view, for instance, one could argue that as human beings we do not have any economically measurable value but have a much more fundamental valuableness simply based on the fact that we are humans (*Menschenwürde*). This is connected with one of the formulations of the categorical imperative: we must treat ourselves and others not as mere means but always also as ends.

genuinely believes the argument to be sound, and if he believes that it ought to be taken seriously, if sound, then it is unclear what role his “hope” can possibly play anymore. There is room for such a hope only in a world in which human beings care for each other to the extent of being willing to procreate new life, or at least willing to value others’ willingness to do so—in a world, in short, in which the extinction of the human race is not the desired outcome. Consider, for the sake of argument, a world (or even a local community) in which people generally believed, *really believed*, that Benatar is right and adopted his moral recommendations for antiprocreation and abortion. Arguably, no hope would be possible in such a world, not in the sense in which we are able to speak about, and perhaps maintain, hope even in the most hopeless of circumstances in a world in which human life is generally valued.

Moreover, it remains unclear what would constitute Benatar’s “being wrong” within his own system. If he is serious, as I believe he is (and as he reminds us himself), then his book is simply too far removed from any recognizably human ethical discussion to be regarded as a candidate for being right or wrong. The question of his being right or wrong does not even arise, because his position cannot be evaluated by any normal human standards *we* could recognize as *ours*. The very possibility of drawing and maintaining (however contextually and revisably) our ordinary distinction between what is good and bad for us—or for people we care about—presupposes a common human world from which we cannot rationally hope everybody to disappear.

Perhaps my criticisms can be expressed as follows. Benatar is arguing from an imagined God’s-eye view, not from a human perspective within our form(s) of life. From the latter perspective, his totalizing comparisons between the goodness or badness of various states of affairs could not be made at all. He just helps himself to an allegedly meaningful notion of goodness (as contrasted to harm) while trying to avoid the background commitments that make such a notion meaningful for us. Even when supposedly discussing the “quality” of life, Benatar speaks about the good and the bad as being more or less quantitatively “distributed” in life (e.g., 2008, 62), strikingly ignoring the fact that a life with “bad” experiences, or a lot of harm, might nonetheless be experienced as deeply meaningful. In general, he neglects, when considering the good and the bad there may be in a life, the internal, experiential perspective of the one who leads that particular life. This highly simplified attitude to the good and the bad in human life is also manifested in Benatar’s assumption that “one cannot be mistaken about whether one is, right now, experiencing a positive or a negative mental state” (2008, 74). Of course one can, unless one is a robot with no genuine experiential states at all. It may often happen that a human being is uncertain about whether her or his (mental or physical) state at the moment ought to be described as positive or as negative. Our life is much more complicated, its goods and ills much more

complexly intertwined, than Benatar admits. Nor can the meaning (or the lack thereof) of death and mortality be adequately conceptualized within Benatar's quantitative approach (cf., e.g., 2008, 218). It is only *from within* a mortal life—a life whose mortality is understood as a deep problem, albeit not automatically therefore a “harm”—instead of any God's-eye view that we may truly examine such a fundamental issue.

In short, Benatar questions some of the most fundamental assumptions about the value of human life constitutive of those forms of life we are (currently) able to see ourselves as inhabiting and sharing with others, so fundamental that it becomes impossible to argue about the view he defends. Accordingly, he writes himself out of the candidacy for being right or wrong. Note that this is importantly different from claiming that his arguments do not succeed or that they are invalid. They may, for all we know, be deductively valid and even based on relatively plausible premises. But the very structure of argumentation he engages in is so remote from truly humanly considerable, humanly “thinkable,” thought structures that he writes himself out of the game. His self-reflective paradox, vulnerable to exposition by transcendental argumentation in a way analogous to, say, the exposition of radical skeptics' self-reflective paradoxes, results from his rhetorically helping himself to some central concepts and values (e.g., the avoidance of suffering) belonging to the “normal” human form of life from which he takes his radical departure. His way of arguing for the moral duty not to procreate any (further) human life eventually renders his employment of the idea of avoiding suffering unintelligible. It is unintelligible in the context he has chosen, because it is fully intelligible only within (what I call) a normal human life inevitably committed to promoting life. Few of us could *really* imagine ourselves putting Benatar's allegedly moral statements into action.

One must be at least a little bit “pro-life” oriented—though of course *not* “pro-life” in any, say, religiously conservative anti-abortion sense—in order to find Benatar's allegedly philanthropic considerations (ending up with “pro-death” and “antinatal” rather than any “pro-life” views, especially when it comes to abortion) worthy of philosophical investigation. Then, paradoxically, they cannot be worthy of philosophical investigation any longer. In order to be able to find Benatar's arguments possible candidates for acceptance, one must already stand outside them.

Furthermore, consider once more Benatar's basic argument, relying on the asymmetry mentioned above. “The absence of bad things, such as pain, is good even if there is nobody to enjoy that good, whereas the absence of good things, such as pleasure, is bad only if there is somebody who is deprived of these good things,” he writes,⁹ arguing that “the avoidance of the bad by never existing is a real advantage over existence, whereas the loss of certain goods by not existing is not a real disadvantage

⁹ See Benatar 2008, chapter 2, for further reflections on this asymmetry.

over never existing” (2008, 14). Ingenious as this argument is, it overlooks the necessary context of human life needed for any such distinctions between the good and the bad. It is only in the context of life itself, within a form of life in which certain assumptions about the value of life are already in place, that we can make the kind of distinctions he makes. One must exist in order to be able to compare what is good and what is bad. This is what I mean by saying, as I did above, that Benatar attempts, desperately, to argue from a God’s-eye view. A God’s-eye view is also problematically implicated in Benatar’s allegedly straightforward distinction between a merely seeming (apparent) transformation or improvement of life and an actual one (2008, 80). He says himself that he is viewing the goods of life objectively, *sub specie aeternitatis*, contrasting this with a *sub specie humanitatis* view (2008, 82, 86–87). It is this hubristic metaphysical realism (as we may call it, keeping in mind that Hilary Putnam famously charged metaphysical realism with a commitment to the God’s-eye view) that leads Benatar to his catastrophic position. As the possibility of sincerely viewing one’s life *sub specie humanitatis*, with no higher perspective available at all, is blocked, there is no way of learning to *accept* one’s life from within, with its harms.¹⁰

From a human-scale perspective, Benatar’s argument (typical of consequentialist moral philosophy, such as utilitarianism, more generally) is a hopeless non sequitur, because its basic premises lack justification, or even full intelligibility, in the context in which they are employed. Indeed, Benatar repeatedly invokes concepts and examples that make sense only if life is already assumed to be fundamentally valuable (see, e.g., 2008, 21, 220). How else could, say, “caring” for others matter to us at all? Benatar claims to be “philanthropic,” but one can hardly avoid the impression that his “concern” for those potentially harmed by coming into existence (2008, 223) is little more than sham concern, a kind of pretense.

In contrast to Benatar’s views, we might attempt the following kind of relatively straightforward transcendental argumentation. First, in order to be able to make distinctions between certain experiences of life (or entire lives) being good or bad, or beneficial or harmful, to the one who lives, or to others, we must live a human life. Second, it is possible to live a human life with a capability for normative distinctions like the ones invoked in the first premise only within a (social, cultural) form of life in which certain assumptions about valuing the lives of others (and oneself) are cherished. Therefore, a philosophical argument seeking to establish that there should be no human life at all cannot invoke the kind of conceptual distinctions invoked in the first premise. Therefore, Benatar’s “pro-death” views are conceptually (and ethically) confused, not just false. Maintaining such views is ultimately impossible, at least for a human being, and it is unclear whether even Benatar can genuinely maintain them. Moreover, and more important,

¹⁰ For Putnam’s criticism of metaphysical realism, see especially his 1990.

maintaining such views is morally wrong, as they violate fundamental moral structures of our common humanity, including the humanity of those individuals who do suffer from their existence (and about whom Benatar thus is, in a sense, correct).

Cultural Unthinkabilities

Conceptual confusion may indeed here be closely related to, or even inseparable from, what might be called *ethical confusion*. It is helpful to invoke here the somewhat amorphous “Wittgensteinian tradition” in moral philosophy, established by Wittgenstein’s pupils and followers like Rush Rhees and Peter Winch, which seeks to disentangle certain tempting ethical and conceptual confusions. Ben Tilghman—one of the more recent representatives of this Wittgenstein-Rhees-Winch tradition in moral philosophy¹¹—argues not against the kind of views Benatar favors but against reductive materialism (such as a complete neurophysiological reduction of the human cognitive faculty to what goes on in the brain) on the grounds of our ethically loaded task of understanding other human beings: “At the edge of materialism we reach one limit of language. Were we to venture beyond that edge our lives would be unrecognizable” (Tilghman 2001, 249). I interpret this as a qualified transcendental argument: a reductive neuroscientific redescription of human cognition would make our understanding of and interaction with *other human beings* impossible; there are, thus, limits to how (scientific) language can be meaningfully used in discussions of what humans are and do.

A different but equally relevant engagement with the limits of language in relation to ethical concerns is typical of the work of another Wittgensteinian moral philosopher, Raimond Gaita (2000, 2004). Gaita argues that philosophical argument *cannot*, and *should not*, lead to what is ethically “unthinkable,” for example, to the toleration of eating dead people or (*pace* some notorious arguments by Peter Singer) of killing three-week-old babies (Gaita 2000, xxviii, 181–83). Presumably, Benatar’s views described above could be added to this list of what *we* (given the kind of beings we contingently are) find unthinkable. Cultures, according to Gaita, are defined and distinguished from each other by what is unthinkable in them; a discussion of such unthinkableabilities from within a framework in which they are unthinkable is, in my terms though not in Gaita’s, a quasi-Kantian

¹¹ It would be impossible to discuss this Wittgensteinian tradition in moral philosophy in any detail here. For a recent contribution, also relevant to the present discussion, see Crary 2007. Like Crary, I see problems in mainstream moral philosophers’ assumptions that moral discourse is specifically tied to explicit moral judgments. If we follow Crary and other followers of Wittgenstein in understanding human language itself as a profoundly moral acquisition, then it is not at all clear that Benatar can coherently use the vocabulary of caring, good, harm, and so forth, in the way he does, given his radical departure from some of the most fundamental moral ideals, such as the value of life, to which most people inside the form(s) of life that we (seem to) know “from within” are committed.

transcendental discussion paralleling the discussion of what is meaningless from the point of view of some actual practice of meaningful language use, or of what cannot be known from the point of view of our actual cognitive system. It is, arguably, part of our “commonsense realism” about other human beings and the common world we live in to inquire into the limits and unthinkabilities that constitute our culturally situated, historically changing human condition, conceptual and ethical alike. Such an inquiry is transcendental and may even lead us, like Gaita, to explore the “mystery” of our acknowledgment of other humans.¹²

Now, Benatar’s approach leaves little room for such a mystery, or for the acknowledgment of the inherent (mysterious) value of another human being. His sharp intellectual exercise makes it impossible for any such value to emerge. This is why *we*—given the cultural unthinkabilities defining who we are—cannot follow him into his arguments and their conclusions. In the world we contingently live in, in a world in which mass murders on a larger and smaller scale have taken place and continue to take place, all the way from Auschwitz to Kauhajokki and beyond, there are indeed culturally loaded ethical limits to what we may truly think and still remain human beings. That is, there are moral limits to what we may think and argue, even in philosophy. There are things we should not, morally speaking, say in philosophy (even though, as Benatar himself repeatedly notes, one need not believe that everything one considers morally wrong should be prohibited by law: certainly I do *not* think that Benatar should not have been allowed to write his book). The conceptual, or transcendental, “cannot” and the moral “should not” (“must not”) go hand in hand here.

Benatar wonders why creating new people is rarely thought to require a justification (2008, 2).¹³ Well, perhaps this is because it is such a deep feature of human life as we know it—of the form of life we contingently lead—that it cannot be justified by any philosophical means (and cannot therefore be put into question either). It is just “there—like our life.”¹⁴ Does life require justification? Do we have to justify the way we live? This depends. We do have to justify specific actions (and omissions), our buying certain kinds of goods, for instance. We may even, with Emmanuel Levinas, doubt our very right to live, to take from someone else the place we occupy, and regard this possibility of doubt as a necessary condition for our being able to lead an ethical life, a life continuously reflecting our infinite duty toward and responsibility for the other.¹⁵ We can in *that* sense “regret” our existence (cf. Benatar 2008, 204), not just because of the harm it contains, but because we always, just by existing,

¹² For related Wittgenstein-inspired reflections on the ethically fundamental status of the other, see Overgaard 2007, as well as Pihlström 2004, chapter 5.

¹³ His chapter 4 discusses this issue in more detail.

¹⁴ On the broad philosophical significance of this slogan, taken from Wittgenstein 1969, see Rhees 2003.

¹⁵ See Levinas 2006. For a discussion, see Pihlström 2009, chapter 6.

fall infinitely short of being good or virtuous enough. But we can hardly meaningfully set out to justify life itself; nor can we overlook the fact that there is always a moral question (presupposing life) that we need to answer regarding the justification of *our* being there—here—instead of someone else. Our lives may ultimately not be justified, and they may even be something to be “regretted,” but life itself is the context within which justification (or the lack of it) and the possible regret make sense. Therefore, Benatar can hardly mean what *we* do when employing words like “deeply regrettable” (e.g., 2008, 208). Such expressions, again, acquire their meaning in a context valuing life, a context necessarily invoked (in Gaita’s terms) through “our common humanity.”

Lars Hertzberg once remarked that the truly vast moral difference lies *not* between those who, considering the fictional scenario of saving three lives by killing an innocent healthy person and giving her or his organs to the three sick people who would otherwise die, would be willing to engage in such a terrible action and those who would *not* *but* between those who seriously consider this case as morally relevant (and would, for instance, use it in teaching ethics classes) and those who would not.¹⁶ Similarly, when Benatar (2008, 3, n. 1) criticizes the defense of eating meat based on the idea that otherwise some animals would not be brought into existence at all by arguing that the same argument would apply to bringing into existence human babies just in order to eat them at a later stage, he steps on the other side of a vast moral gulf. It is, once gain, impossible to take seriously his comparison between the meat-eating argument and the imagined “baby-eating argument,” even as a fictional construction for sheer argumentative purposes. The latter “argument” is simply too far off the scale, too far removed from any even remotely humanly serious ethical position to be employed in philosophical argumentation about how we ought to justify our actions.

When cultural unthinkabilities are (unreflectively, irresponsibly, immorally) “thought” (entertained, considered), it will no longer be possible to evaluate whether the arguments presented are “right” or “wrong”—*pace* Benatar’s suspicion that people will believe, and hope, that he is wrong (2008, 16). The departure from our common standards of rightness¹⁷ is so radical that no such evaluation is *possible* any more. Benatar thus demands something impossible when intellectualistically requiring that one “has to examine the arguments for the disliked conclusion” (2008, 203). This is indeed “reason gone mad,” as he himself (2008, 203)

¹⁶ This is discussed by Hertzberg in a paper published in Finnish, “Voiko etiikkaa soveltaa?” (Can One Apply Ethics?), *niin & näin* 4 (2000): 54–61. I have failed to locate any writing of his in English invoking exactly the same point.

¹⁷ I accept, obviously, the possibility that our standards, including our valuing of life, may change in the course of the development of our form(s) of life. But this would ultimately redefine “us,” possibly beyond recognition.

fears his critics might read him.¹⁸ This concludes my transcendental argument against Benatar.

Conclusion: The Integration of Ethics and Metaphysics

As I have already remarked, I have not examined Benatar's views in order to express disagreement with them. If I said I disagreed with him, that would be like calling the Grand Canyon "pretty" or the Holocaust a "naughty" thing to do.¹⁹ Language would betray us. For the purposes of this article, I have studied Benatar's arguments as symptoms of something more profound that disturbs me and ought to disturb us all.

A metaphilosophically crucial issue here is the relation between ethics and metaphysics. Benatar joins those—undoubtedly the majority of philosophers today—who prefer to settle the metaphysical issues first and then see how the ethical ones can be settled. If my considerations are correct, however, an approach like Benatar's is unethical from the very start. This observation is closely related to the claim that his position is not just conceptually but also ethically confused, vulnerable to a transcendental, reflexive critique in the manner presented above. It is unethical because it breaches some of the most fundamental (though, admittedly, historically changing and only contextually established) transcendental assumptions and limits constituting our form of life, thereby also breaching, by invoking "cultural unthinkableabilities," the criteria of responsible philosophical reason use and argumentation.

Instead of following Benatar's arguments, we should join Raimond Gaita and other Wittgensteinians in insisting that it is not the case that the best, or the most intelligent, argument should always be followed. Philosophy is argumentation, but it is much more. It is a serious attempt to reflect on the lives we lead in this world, surrounded by other people—contingently, in a world in which mass murder is a reality and from which we cannot explain away evil and suffering. In addition to the Wittgensteinian moral philosophers I have cited, one might here invoke William James's discussion of the clashes of "philosophical temperaments" in Lecture I of *Pragmatism* (James 1975). For James, philosophical temperaments, far from being refutable (or justifiable) by means of mere argumentation, are the contexts or standpoints that enable us to engage in argumentation. This, however, does not mean that we would not be responsible for a continuous self-critical examination and development of our temperaments. On the contrary, our moral duty to reflect on what we are saying, in philosophical contexts and elsewhere, extends to the very core of our identities as thinkers. An essential question then is: Can I

¹⁸ "Which view we adopt must depend on the evidence," we are told (Benatar 2008, 210). Fine, but there is no neutral evidence available here. Any evidence we may gather regarding philosophical theses on the scale of Benatar's must be deeply committed from the very start.

¹⁹ These examples are drawn from Phillips 2005 and 2009, 167.

really commit myself to what I am saying, can *I*, here and now, really maintain the view I am putting forward? (Reflection continues: Who am I, or what kind of a person am I, if I can, or cannot?)

Indeed, it is a major task for any responsible thinker encountering Benatar's position to resist it without in any way "justifying" the suffering there is. We cannot justify the bad things that befall people in this world; there is no ethically responsible theodicy available, for instance. But if we attempt to fight against evil and suffering, we must first value human life. No such fight is possible if we too radically depart from the form(s) of life valuing life itself.

I am not saying that this is an easy attitude to maintain. After all, there is a reflexive issue involved here: I have discussed, argumentatively, a view I think—and have argued—should *not* be discussed. How can we argue against discussing something without actually discussing it? Far from believing that we have found a satisfactory solution, I do remain puzzled here; we all should. (And even *this* is a philosophical view, requiring argumentative treatment. When saying what I am saying here, I cannot step out of the argumentative game of philosophizing.) In any event, I am arguing that not every argument, even if sound, should or even can (if I am correct) be pursued. There are limits to what we may legitimately and responsibly argue in philosophy (and elsewhere). Embracing (historically contextualized) cultural unthinkabilities and crossing the limits they set to responsible thought ought to be seen as a philosophical failure as much as, or even much more seriously than, a purely intellectual argumentative flaw is a philosophical failure. Any argument, including a supposedly purely metaphysical one about the nature of personhood (applicable to, say, the abortion issue), ought to be examined in a thoroughly ethical context; there is no ethically neutral context for metaphysical argumentation at all.²⁰ This is the broader metaphilosophical moral we may draw from our consideration of Benatar's hopelessly confused position.

It is not clear, I have suggested, that we should even *tolerate* an argument like Benatar's—although I must admit that I do not know what exactly it would mean not to tolerate it. I am not saying that Benatar's book, or similar ones, ought to be burned; I am *not at all* requiring that, politically, the freedom of speech and opinion should be restricted. After all, as Heinrich Heine famously remarked, if one starts burning books, one will eventually burn human beings. What I am suggesting is that moral philosophers should be extremely cautious even in starting to follow—to read and think about—arguments like Benatar's. What may initially seem a more or less plausible premise will turn out to lead to dangerous, ethically monstrous conclusions. Yet, again paradoxically, we must be able to think what we ultimately realize is unthinkable, and we are deeply responsible for maintaining and developing our capacities for

²⁰ On the relation between ethics and metaphysics, see again Pihlström 2009.

such thought. We must be able to argue against arguing about—either for or against—certain unthinkable, unthinkably monstrous, views. There is no easy way out of this tension. The philosophical task of using reason, come what may, is neither ethically neutral nor easy. Perhaps it is not even possible for beings like us.

Benatar (2008, 5, n. 5) finds the neonates' cry at the moment of their birth "ironically appropriate," given his meek view of the "net harm" of existence. I do share this attitude: the neonate's cry can be seen (by us, not by the neonates themselves) as an expression of the human existential anxiety at being "thrown into" the world, which is more or less absurd. However, human life itself is the condition for the possibility of this "thrownness," of Heideggerian *Geworfenheit*. We cannot solve our anxiety by ceasing to be. We have to be there, here, in order to be anxious enough to be able to argue ethically about anything, including our right to be. Being here, and to some extent valuing that being, is also required for our being able to examine our paradoxical situation as thinkers committed not only to reason and argumentation but also to the ethical requirement of finding some things more important in life than reason and argumentation.²¹

Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies
 P.O. Box 4 (Fabianinkatu 24)
 FI-00014 University of Helsinki
 Finland
 sami.pihlstrom@helsinki.fi

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²¹ My greatest debt is to Dr. Olli-Pekka Moisio, with whom I have discussed the topic of this essay several times. He would presumably formulate an argument analogous to the one of this article in a way derived from Theodor Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's critical theory, instead of Gaita's and others' Wittgensteinianism, but the conclusion would, I think, be analogous. More generally, the article is based on my research project funded by the Academy of Finland, "The Ethical Grounds of Metaphysics."

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