

How *not* to reject Benatar's asymmetry argument: An antinatalist reply to Magnusson

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1. Introduction

In this dissertation, I refute Erik Magnusson's objections to David Benatar's axiological asymmetry argument for antinatalism. Antinatalism is the view that procreation is morally wrong. In *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (hereafter BNHB), Benatar (2006) makes two arguments for that view. The first is the axiological asymmetry argument (AAA). The second is the quality-of-life argument (QoLA). I will focus on the former, as that is the one Magnusson (2019) attempts to reject in his paper *How to reject Benatar's asymmetry argument*. Magnusson makes three objections to AAA. I will argue that they are all unconvincing.

2. The Axiological Asymmetry Argument

I will begin by introducing AAA, explaining that it is based on an asymmetry between the absence of harms and the absence of benefits. While AAA shows that coming into existence is always a harm, QoLA aims to reveal that the harm is a great one. I will not outline QoLA in detail as it is not the present focus, but its central aim is to show that since even the best lives are in fact very bad—and

a lot worse than people typically take them to be—coming into existence is always a considerable harm and therefore procreation is always wrong. Conversely, AAA does not generate antinatalism on its own. It only shows that coming into existence is a harm. The argument is based on a proposed axiological asymmetry between harms and benefits:¹

Uncontroversially, a symmetrical relationship holds between the presence of harm and the presence of benefit such that

- (i) the presence of harm is bad, and
- (ii) the presence of benefit is good.

However, an asymmetrical evaluation holds between the absence of harm and benefit such that

- (iii) the absence of harm is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas
- (iv) the absence of benefit is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. (Benatar, 2006, p. 30)

From this axiological asymmetry (AA) and the fairly uncontentious claim that every life involves some amount of harm, it follows that coming into existence is always a harm. To demonstrate, consider Figure 1 and compare scenario A, in

¹ Here “axiological” simply means that the asymmetry is an asymmetry in our values (as opposed to a logical asymmetry, for instance).

which potential person X exists, and scenario B, in which X never comes into existence.

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of harm (Bad)	(3) Absence of harm (Good)
(2) Presence of benefit (Good)	(4) Absence of benefit (Not bad)

Figure 1. The AA matrix. (ibid., p. 38)

By comparing quadrants (1) and (3), we see that B has an advantage over A: the absence of harm in B is good while the presence of harm in A is bad. Compare next quadrants (2) and (4). As per claims (ii) and (iv) of AA, though the presence of benefit in A is good, the absence of benefit in B is not bad. Therefore, Benatar asserts, (2) is not an advantage over (4). Thus, B has an advantage over A, but A does not have an advantage over B, meaning that B is preferable to A. (ibid., pp. 37-38)

A couple of clarifications are in order. Firstly, there has been confusion over whether claim (iii) is to be read as an *impersonal* or a *person-affecting* claim. (e.g.

Harman, 2009; DeGrazia, 2010; and Bayne, 2010) Benatar has underlined that the latter is the correct reading. (Benatar, 2013, pp. 125-126) When Benatar claims that the absence of harm is good, he means that the absence of harm is good *for* someone. The obvious contention is that something cannot be good *for* someone if that someone never exists. But, as Benatar explains, (iii) is not making the “absurd literal claim that there is some actual person for whom the absent pain is good.” (Benatar, 2006, p. 31) Rather, the judgement in (iii) is made “*with reference to the (potential) interests of a person who either does or does not exist.*” (ibid., p. 30) (iii) tells us that the absence of harm is good “when judged in terms of the interests of the person who would otherwise have existed.” We do not know who that person would have been had they existed, but we can still judge that the absence of the harms she would have experienced in the counterfactual case in which she did exist is good. (ibid., p. 31)

A second potential contention is that it may be unclear why (2) is not an advantage over (4). I will discuss this confusion at length in section 3.2, but for now, it is worth noting that the phrase “not bad” perhaps fails to sufficiently convey what AA implies about the absence of benefit in non-existence. To clarify, “not bad” is used as a comparative evaluation. Rather than meaning that (4) is simply neutral or indifferent (and thus arguably worse than a positive alternative), “not bad” specifically means that (4) is *not worse than* (2). (Benatar, 2012, p. 135) Claim (iv) could be rephrased as “the absence of benefit is *not worse than the presence of benefit* unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation”. The upshot of this definition is that, as long as AA is accepted, it is

indisputable that (2) is not an advantage over (4). Thus, scenario B is always preferable for X.

2.1 Reasons to Accept AA

So far, I have introduced AA and the way it shows that coming into existence is always a harm. However, I have not mentioned any distinct reasons to accept AA. Given the asymmetry's controversial implications, some robust justification is expected.² Benatar admits that the truth of AA is difficult to prove definitively. (Benatar, 2015, p. 24) However, there is a “constellation of interconnecting reasons” why it should be accepted. (ibid.) These reasons are largely based on AA's explanatory power and include (but are not limited to) the fact that AA is the best explanation for four commonly held judgements, the fact that AA offers a solution to the non-identity problem, and the fact that symmetrical accounts of absent harms and benefits fail.

AA can explain four other moral asymmetries which are accepted by an “overwhelming majority of people”. (Benatar, 2013, p. 123) I will call these other asymmetries the intuitive asymmetries (the IAs):

- (IA1) We have a duty to avoid creating people who would lead miserable lives, but we have no duty to create people who would lead happy lives.

² Contrarily, Benatar believes that AA is in fact already widely accepted (albeit usually implicitly). (Benatar, 2013, p. 123) He thinks that people tend to question it only when they see the conclusions to which it leads. (Benatar, 2015, p. 24)

- (IA2) It is strange to cite as a reason for having a child that that child will thereby be benefited. By contrast, it is not strange to cite as a reason for *not* having a child that that child will suffer.
- (IA3) When one has created a suffering child, it makes sense to regret having done so—and to regret it for the sake of that child. By contrast, when one fails to create a happy child, it does not make sense to regret that failure for the sake of that child.
- (IA4) We are rightly sad for distant people who suffer. By contrast, we are not sad for absent happy people in uninhabited lands. (Benatar, 2013, p. 123)

AA can explain all of these commonly endorsed judgements. As per IA1, we feel a lack of duty to bring happy people into existence because the absence of benefit for those potential people is not a bad thing. Conversely, we want to avoid bringing into existence people whose lives are full of suffering, since the absence of that suffering is a good thing even if it is attained by the sufferers never existing. IA2 demonstrates AA in the sense that we do not find it axiologically odd to refrain from procreation for the sake of the potential child's well-being, whereas it seems strange to claim that one will procreate for the sake of the child, whoever that child ends up being. IA3 is a case of AA in action too. We do not regret not having a child for the sake of the potential child since that non-existent person is not worse off from the absence of benefit. Likewise, as per IA4, we shed no tears

about uninhabited lands on the basis that they could have been inhabited with happy people since the absence of that happiness is not bad as no one is deprived of it. Conversely, we can and do feel sad about the suffering of existent people in distant lands as that suffering is bad.

The fact that AA can explain all of these asymmetries is a good reason to take it seriously. Many have attempted to give alternative explanations to the IAs, but most of them fail to explain all of them and certainly fail to explain them as simply as AA does. (Benatar, 2013, p. 127)

Furthermore, Benatar (2006, pp. 38-40) argues that a symmetrical view of absent harms and benefits simply does not work. I will discuss the issue of symmetry in section 3.1. AA also offers a solution to certain population ethics problems such as the non-identity problem. I will not expound this consideration here as the specifics are not strictly relevant for current purposes.³ In any case, all of these features collectively provide good reason to accept AA.

3. Magnusson's Objections to AAA

Having summarised AAA, I will now move on to Magnusson's objections. Benatar has replied to a lot of critics (e.g. Benatar, 2012, 2013, and 2019), but he has not yet addressed Magnusson's ambitiously titled article. Magnusson makes three main arguments, individually rejecting what he takes to be premises 1, 2, and 3 of AAA. He reformulates AAA as follows.

³ See Benatar (2015, pp. 34-37) for a discussion about AA and population ethics.

- (P1) There is a fundamental asymmetry between harms and benefits in terms of their presence and absence.
- (P2) This asymmetry entails that coming into existence is always a net harm.
- (P3) That coming into existence is always a net harm entails that it is always wrong to procreate.⁴ (Magnusson, 2019, p. 675)

I will evaluate Magnusson's objections to these three premises, showing that they all fail. I begin by analysing Magnusson's objection to P1. I argue that it fails as it relies on a misinterpretation of AA. Specifically, it mistakes the axiological claim for a logical one. I then refute Magnusson's objection to P2. To advance it, Magnusson has to accept P1 for the sake of argument. I show that the argument is in fact incompatible with the truth of P1. Magnusson is thus led to repurpose it as an argument against P1. However, this strategy fails too, for the same reason his first argument does. Next, I discuss Magnusson's refutation of P3, demonstrating that it is irrelevant since Benatar actually never posits P3. Finally, I appraise Magnusson's concluding remarks about AAA. I argue that, while he is strictly speaking right in claiming that AAA is unnecessary for Benatar to generate antinatalism, the argument still has its place.

⁴ The observant reader will notice that Benatar never actually asserts P3. Magnusson rightly acknowledges that in a 2015 publication, Benatar explicitly says that P3 is not part of AAA. (Magnusson, 2019, p. 675, citing Benatar, 2015, p. 40) Magnusson is wrong, however, in thinking that this is a revision of Benatar's view. It is in fact unchanged from Benatar's position in BNHB, released in 2006. (Benatar, 2006, pp. 98-99) For more on this point, see sections 3.3 and 3.4.

3.1 Rejecting Magnusson's Objection to P1

P1 of Magnusson's formulation of Benatar's argument is simply a statement of AA, so I will use the names "P1" and "AA" interchangeably. Magnusson's argument against P1 may be construed as follows.

- (a) According to claim (iii) of AA, the absence of *harm* is *good* when judged as a counterfactual person-affecting judgement (i.e. when judged in terms of the interests of a person who would have experienced that harm had they existed).
- (b) If there is nothing incoherent about claim (iii) as interpreted in (a), then there is nothing incoherent about modifying claim (iv) to say that the absence of *benefit* is *bad* when judged as a counterfactual person-affecting judgement.
- (c) It follows that if the absence of benefit in non-existence outweighs the presence of harm in existence, existence is better than never coming into existence. Thus, coming into existence is not always a harm.
(*ibid.*, pp. 676-679)

(a) is obviously true (as shown in section 2), and (c) (presumably) follows from the conjunction of (a) and (b). (b) is where the problem lies for Magnusson. The problem is not that (b) is false *per se*. Rather, Magnusson's mistake is that he argues for a *logical* truth, while Benatar is making an *axiological* point. Put differently, in (b), Magnusson says that there is nothing incoherent about modifying Benatar's claim (iv) to mirror the counterfactual person-affecting

reading of claim (iii). He is right that there is nothing *incoherent* about it, but the claim's coherence does not imply that it is axiologically true.

As it turns out, either unwittingly or deliberately, all Magnusson does here is construct a convoluted call for symmetry. His objection to P1 is essentially one of the objections Benatar addresses in a reply to his critics (Benatar, 2013). Such objections deny AA outright on logical grounds and have been attempted by writers such as Harman (2009) and Cabrera (2011).⁵ Benatar rejects these kinds of objections by noting, as I have: "The mistake in this objection is that it misconstrues my basic asymmetry as a logical rather than axiological claim." (Benatar, 2013, p. 126) Magnusson does not acknowledge this response from Benatar. Instead, he asserts that "there is *no reason* why the counterfactual reasoning deployed to make sense of [claim (iii)] as a person-affecting claim would not also modify [claim (iv)]" (Magnusson, 2019, p. 677, *my emphasis*)

Insofar as we consider harms and benefits from a purely logical standpoint, there indeed is no independent reason to treat claims (iii) and (iv) differently. Benatar, however, is making a value-based rather than logical assertion. To say that symmetry would not be logically incoherent is to say nothing about whether or not asymmetry is more in line with our values. As discussed in section 2.1, there are plenty of reasons to accept AA, such as the fact that it corresponds with our axiological intuitions in cases such as the IAs and the non-identity problem. If

⁵ It might be initially unclear that Magnusson's objection is essentially that of these other writers. This is because Magnusson conceals the gist of his argument in a muddled discussion about the counterfactual nature of claim (iii). Nevertheless, in the end, his argument boils down to the assertion that a symmetry between the absence of harm and the absence of benefit is not (logically) incoherent. (Magnusson, 2019, p. 677)

Magnusson wants to salvage his argument, he has to show why symmetry between harms and benefits would be more axiologically plausible than asymmetry.

In a way, Magnusson does eventually attempt exactly this. He notes that Benatar might respond to his objection by arguing that a symmetrical view of harms and benefits “may conflict with our intuitive judgments or commit us to views that we would otherwise reject”. (ibid., p. 678) Magnusson is referring to the IAs. His train of thought is a bit perplexing here. As we saw, he has denied AA outright, claiming that there is “no reason” not to uphold symmetry (ibid., p. 677), but he now considers an antinatalist response which is just one of the original Benatarian reasons not to do so. Perplexity aside, Magnusson goes on to reject this potential counter using a two-pronged defence. This defence offers him a slightly more promising line against P1. Instead of mistakenly pursuing a logical contention like his original objection, he now argues against AA within the axiological field.

The first prong of Magnusson’s defence is the claim that an appeal to intuition may not work in Benatar’s favour. (ibid., p. 678) We must choose either to reject AA along with the IAs it explains or to accept AA and its arguably uncomfortable procreational implications.⁶ Quoting Rivka Weinberg, Magnusson asserts that, “the implications of Benatar’s view may be more counterintuitive than [the IAs] are intuitive.” (Magnusson, 2019, p. 678, citing Weinberg, 2012, p. 28)

⁶ Magnusson fails to mention that rejecting AA also involves rejecting a plausible solution to issues like the non-identity problem.

It appears that Magnusson (and possibly Weinberg) has missed the section in the concluding chapter of BNHB titled “Countering the counterintuitiveness objection”. There, Benatar addresses just this line of argument. First, he reminds us of just what we are giving up if we reject AA. Unless we can produce plausible alternative explanations of the IAs, we are led to hold that there is a duty to create happy people, that we should not find it strange to cite as a reason for procreating the fact that the child will thereby be benefited, that we should regret not having brought happy children into existence—and regret it for the non-existent children’s sake, and that we should be sad about the absence of happy people in uninhabited lands. (Benatar, 2006, p. 204) These are arguably tough bullets, but the pronatalist could nevertheless claim she is willing to bite them.

However, Benatar points out another problem with the counterintuitiveness objection. Even if the implications of his view seem counterintuitive, the dominant intuitions about procreation are thoroughly untrustworthy for a couple of reasons. For one, he writes: “how reliable can an intuition be if, even absent the interests of others, it allows the infliction of great harm that could have been avoided without any cost to the person who is harmed?” (ibid., p. 205) Indeed, if every life is as full of suffering as Benatar shows with QoLA, then the intuition that procreation is permissible allows for a massive amount of harm to be inflicted on unconsenting people. In fairness, there seems to be a whiff of circularity here since if the pronatalist denies both AA and QoLA, she can also deny that her

intuitions lead to (needless or overwhelming) suffering. Still, it is a sobering reminder of the stakes involved.⁷

Benatar's second point about procreative intuitions is more striking: "we have excellent reason for thinking that pro-natal intuitions are the product of (at least non-rational, but possibly irrational) psychological forces." (ibid.) It is quite uncontroversial that we have a biological instinct to procreate. Moreover, there is excellent reason to believe that there is an evolutionary advantage to having pronatalist beliefs. Those who find procreation morally wrong are obviously less inclined to procreate and pass their genes along. Evolutionary forces thus push us towards the intuition that procreating is not harmful. Add to this the psychological biases that cause us to rate our lives as better than they really are (e.g. Pollyannaism), and you have a cocktail of prevalent deep-rooted and non-rational pronatalist prejudice.⁸

Thus, to return to the counterintuitiveness dilemma, rejecting AA involves rejecting a uniform and simple solution to the widely held IAs and to issues such as the non-identity problem. Conversely, rejecting symmetry involves rejecting a pronatalist doctrine driven by primal evolutionary drives and psychological biases. It seems fair to argue that the latter is more plausible.

⁷ Denying QoLA is, of course, a separate task—and not an easy one. Thus, Benatar would probably discredit any accusation of circularity.

⁸ For more on the evolutionary and psychological basis of pronatalism, see e.g. Benatar (2006, pp. 64-69).

As mentioned, Magnusson's defence against Benatar's potential objection is two-pronged. The counterintuitiveness objection is the first prong and is, as demonstrated, unconvincing. According to Magnusson, the second one is more to the point:

Any intuitive cost associated with a symmetrical account of harms and benefits is a problem for which Benatar himself is answerable, given that this is an implication of the reasoning that underlies *his* view. One of Benatar's standard moves in responding to critics is to claim that their proposed strategies for resisting his asymmetry argument leave them unable to explain [the IAs]. But if the preceding arguments are sound, then Benatar cannot explain them either. (Magnusson, 2013, p. 679)

It may be unclear at first reading, but this point is completely circular. Magnusson first (rightly) notes that AA can explain the IAs, then (wrongly) claims that AA is false, and finally demands that Benatar now explain the IAs. This is a bizarre argument considering the only point of the IAs was to demonstrate AA's explanatory power. They were never the main issue Benatar was debating or endorsing. Yet, Magnusson now argues that Benatar must explain them in some novel way. If, as Magnusson claims, AA fails, then it is irrelevant whether Benatar can explain the IAs. Indeed, all the antinatalist needs to do to defuse this argument is to show that AA does not succumb to Magnusson's critique (which is what I argued above). Since AA still stands, the IAs are explained by it, and thus Magnusson's second prong is not a problem either.

In sum, Magnusson's initial rejection of P1 is actually just a reupholstered denial of AA on logical grounds. Magnusson reveals a logical issue with AA, failing to take into account that AA is an axiological claim rather than a logical one, meaning his objection is powerless. However, he then predicts that Benatar might appeal to the explanatory power of AA in its defence. This prediction shifts the debate from the logical arena to the axiological one. Magnusson presents two considerations against AA and its explanatory merit: the counterintuitiveness objection and the claim that, given the (alleged) falsity of AA, Benatar is now answerable for the IAs. I have argued that the latter consideration is unconvincing since the rejection of pronatalism only requires us to abandon a primitive view driven by evolutionary and psychological forces while the rejection of AA requires us to abandon a simple solution to the IAs and to issues like the non-identity problem. I then argued that the second consideration is thoroughly circular and thus ineffective against P1.

3.2 Rejecting Magnusson's Objection to P2

Does Magnusson's second objection fare better than the first? He targets P2 next, claiming that, even if P1 is true, its truth does not entail that coming into existence is always a harm. He accepts P1 for the sake of argument and attempts to show that AAA fails regardless. (ibid.)

Magnusson notes that his argument is easier to consider if we assign numerical values to the quadrants in the AA matrix (Figure 1).⁹ Figure 2 is an example of possible values.

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of harm -1	(3) Absence of harm +1
(2) Presence of benefit +5	(4) Absence of benefit 0

Figure 2. (ibid.)

Now, Magnusson's second argument can be construed as follows.

- (a) If $A > B$ (i.e. if the net value of A is higher the net value of B), then coming into existence is not a harm to X.
- (b) The net value of A is the combined value of (1) and (2). The net value of B is the combined value of (3) and (4).
- (c) The value of quadrant (1) is the negation of the value of quadrant (3). (For example, if (1) = -1, then (3) is +1.)

⁹ This strategy is actually incompatible with AA (or at least fruitless), as I will argue in a moment.

- (d) (4) is neutral: it is neither good nor bad, neither positive nor negative. Its value is thus 0.
- (e) It follows that if the value of (2) is more than double the negative value of (1) (i.e. if the benefit in (2) is more than twice as good as the harm in (1) is bad), then $A > B$.
- (f) Therefore, if the value of (2) is more than double the negative value of (1), then coming into existence is not a harm to X.
- (g) There are at least some lives in which the value of (2) is more than double the negative value of (1).
- (h) Therefore, coming into existence is not always a harm. (ibid.)

For example, in the case of Figure 2, the net value of scenario A is $5 + (-1) = 4$ while the net value of scenario B is $1 + 0 = 1$. Thus, $A > B$, meaning that coming into existence is not a harm to X. Magnusson infers that P2 is wrong: the truth of AA does not entail that coming into existence is always a net harm. Coming into existence is only a harm when the absence of harm in non-existence outweighs the presence of benefit in existence.

The problem with this argument is that premise (a) calls for the wrong comparison. This happens because the argument is based on an interpretation of quadrant (4) that is incompatible with the truth of AA (and Magnusson accepts AA for the sake of argument before advancing his second argument). Before I elaborate on this point, it is worth saying a few words about the structure of Magnusson's paper.

Magnusson does eventually acknowledge the aforementioned incompatibility problem. First, however, he discusses two other potential Benatarian rebuttals that seek to show that premise (a) is irreconcilable with AA. Benatar raises these problems as objections to the strategy of assigning numerical values to the quadrants in the AA matrix and then comparing the net values of A and B like Magnusson does. (Benatar, 2006, pp. 45-48) The objections involve Benatar's Healthy and Sick analogy (Magnusson, 2019, p. 680; see Benatar, 2006, pp. 42-43 and 45-47) as well as the suggestion that there is a threshold of harm above which benefits have no compensating effect. (Magnusson, 2019, pp. 679-680; see Benatar, 2006, pp. 46 and 63-64) Magnusson discusses these issues at length. However, whether or not he refutes them convincingly is irrelevant for present purposes since his argument fails due to an unrelated problem.

Magnusson addresses that problem only in the last two paragraphs of the section on P2.¹⁰ (Magnusson, 2009, pp. 681-682) The issue is based on another response Benatar has made to just the kind of objection Magnusson is presenting (Benatar, 2012, p. 135). Yet, Magnusson claims it is not sufficient to kill his argument. I argue he is wrong. As mentioned, the problem is that to advance his argument, Magnusson accepts AA for the sake of argument, but he then compares A to B in premise (a) in a way that is incompatible AA.

Before I examine just how Magnusson's comparison is incompatible with AA, let us consider what leads some pronatalists to such a mistake. As discussed in

¹⁰ Presumably he did not address this point at all in his initial drafts as he thanks a reviewer for bringing it to his attention. (Magnusson, 2019, p. 681) I suppose it is therefore no surprise that his response to it is lacking and unconvincing. Regardless, I will present his defence as charitably as possible.

section 2, Benatar has possibly failed to emphasise sufficiently that the phrase “not bad” in quadrant (4) should be taken quite literally to mean “not worse”, particularly “not worse than quadrant (2)”. In response to a Magnusson-esque objection by Thaddeus Metz (2011), Benatar underlines this point:

The claim that absent pain in Scenario B is “good” means ... that it is better than the presence of pain in Scenario A. Similarly, the claim that absent pleasure in Scenario B is “not bad” means that it is not worse than the presence of pleasure in Scenario A. (Benatar, 2012, p. 135)

He notes that, if one accepts these evaluations (which is just to say that one accepts AA), then one cannot resist the conclusion that (2) has no advantage over (4). That conclusion is simply baked into AA. (ibid.)

The ambiguous evaluation “not bad” is presumably what also leads some pronatalists to assign the numerical value 0 to quadrant (4) while assigning positive and negative values to the other quadrants, even though Benatar argues against this strategy in BNHB. (Benatar, 2006, pp. 45-48) Suppose quadrant (4) is assigned 0 and quadrant (2) a positive value like in Figure 2. These evaluations are understandably difficult to reconcile with the idea that (4) is not worse than (2). If the pronatalist insists on assigning numerical values to the quadrants, perhaps the only way to still honour the truth of AA would be to assign (4) the phrase “not worse than (2)” rather than any mathematical symbol. This would

make it clear that, as long as AA holds, (4) is not going to play the arithmetic game; it is simply a fact that (2) has no advantage over (4).¹¹

Now, Magnusson would presumably be quick to note that nowhere in his second objection does he (explicitly) compare (2) with (4). Indeed, this is one of the two defences he employs against the incompatibility problem. He argues that it is not obvious that the problem can undermine his rejection of P2, since at no point has he claimed that the absence of benefit in quadrant (4) is *bad*. (Magnusson, 2019, p. 682) Rather, he has, for the sake of argument, conceded that it is *not* bad, but argued that “*how good* the absence of harm can be in non-existence will depend on how the presence of that harm in existence would have been offset by the presence of benefit.” (ibid.) This is just to say that he has effectively left (4) aside (which he can presumably do since its value is 0 and it is thus inconsequential) and compared the sum of (1) and (2) to (3). This is not strictly true, however. The fact that, due to being valued at 0, (4) has no apparent effect on the net value of B does not change the fact that the way Magnusson determines the net value of B is by adding (3) with (4) as per premise (b).

Indeed, this defence is utterly unconvincing. It may be *superficially* true that Magnusson does not directly compare (2) with (4) or label the latter bad. However, all Magnusson does here is *conceal* the fact that he is still comparing (2) and (4) and ending up with a non-neutral result—something that AA states is impossible. To detect this concealment, consider how Magnusson manipulates

¹¹ Of course, this renders pointless the assignment of numerical values in the first place. Indeed, what I have suggested here is just another way to demonstrate that such a strategy is incompatible with the truth of AA.

the value of (2). Instead of admitting that, no matter how high, it is not an advantage over (4), he combines (2) with (1) (and implicitly (4) with (3)), effectively obscuring the quadrants in the resulting sums. Using the exemplifying values in Figure 2, the resulting matrix ends up looking like this:

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
<p>(1 + 2)</p> <p>Presence of harm + Presence of benefit</p> <p>+4</p>	<p>(3 + 4)</p> <p>Absence of harm + Absence of benefit</p> <p>+1</p>

Figure 3.

Notice that Magnusson is still (indirectly) comparing (2) to (4). The fact that he has muddled the value of (2) by combining it with the value of (1) (and done the same with (4) and (3)) does not mean that he is not making the symmetrical claim that (2) is (or amounts to) an advantage over (4). No matter how Magnusson presents it, his argument against P2 is simply not compatible with the acceptance of P1. Whether he compares (2) to (4) directly or indirectly, he is still making the (explicit or implicit) claim that (4) is better than (2), which is incongruous with AA.¹²

¹² Furthermore, I am not sure that Magnusson is completely ingenuous when he twists his argument into this form in which (4) is ostensibly ignored. I say this because he finishes the section on P2 by quoting Smuts: “something that is not bad can still be less good than an alternative.” (ibid., citing Smuts, 2014, p. 719) Smuts is quite clearly talking about (4), comparing it directly to

Thus, the incompatibility of AA and the (direct or indirect) claim that (2) can be better than (4) neutralises Magnusson's objection to P2. Magnusson, however, proposes an alternative defence against the incompatibility problem. He writes, "even if [the incompatibility problem] is sound, it would at best show that I have strayed from my professed argumentative strategy, not that [AAA] succeeds." (Magnusson, 2019, p. 681) He says that if the incompatibility is true, then his objection to P2 "could simply be repurposed as an additional argument against P1". (ibid.) There are two problems with this strategy. Firstly, it is a considerable concession. Magnusson's original plan was to reject all three premises of AAA, thereby ensuring that even if one or two of his arguments fail, AAA remains defeated. I have shown that his rejection of P1 fails. He is thus left only with his objections to P2 and P3.¹³ If he now concedes that his objection to P2 is in fact an argument against P1, then he has nothing against P2. In fairness, he could still successfully reject AAA if this repurposed argument revealed a fatal flaw with P1. I argue that it does not.

This is due to the second, more decisive problem with the repurposing strategy. Like Magnusson's first objection, the repurposed argument simply collapses into an outright denial of AA. As per premise (a), if the net value of existing is higher than the net value of never existing, then *logically* it makes sense to prefer the former. This amounts to no more than a call for symmetry. As discussed in section

(2). This is what Magnusson claims he is *not* doing. When citing Smuts, he is once again operating on a misinterpretation of Benatar's usage of "not bad". Again, "not bad" specifically means "not worse than (2)". Given that definition, Smuts' passage basically says that even if (4) is not worse than (2), it can still be less good than (2). This is clearly incomprehensible (unless there is some sense in which something can be simultaneously "not worse" but "less good" than another thing).

¹³ Moreover, the objection to P3 is not promising, as I will demonstrate in section 3.3.

3.1, if Magnusson wants to deny AA, he has to show why symmetry is more plausible, keeping in mind AA's extensive axiological explanatory power. I showed that his axiological arguments for symmetry (the counterintuitiveness objection and the demand for Benatar to explain the IAs) have been lacking so far. Seeing as the repurposing strategy Magnusson suggests here simply transforms his second argument into a copy of the first, all of my challenges to the latter now apply to the former. If Magnusson wants to advance a refutation of P1, he must give some convincing reason to prefer symmetry to asymmetry.

Before moving on, it is worth saying a few words about the burden of proof. This applies to both of Magnusson's first two arguments since they end up arguing the same point. I have stated that in order to reject AA, Magnusson needs to justify why symmetry is preferable to asymmetry. He might dispute this by claiming that the proponent of symmetry is not accountable for positive arguments since symmetry is the prevailing view given the controversial implications of asymmetry. There are a few problems with this response.

Firstly, it is not clear that the burden of proof lands on the antinatalist. As mentioned in section 2.1, Benatar thinks that AA is implicitly accepted by most people. (Benatar, 2013, p. 123) It is only discovering AA's procreative implications that causes people to recoil. (Benatar, 2015, p. 24) Moreover, even if one is not certain that Benatar's arguments are sound, one must remember that *if they are sound*, then we humans inflict massive amounts of needless harm every day. Arguably, if there is even a chance that that is true, the burden of proof falls on those endorsing the potentially harmful position.

However, rather than initiate a game of burden tennis, let us consider a more general issue with this potential pronatalist response. The problem is that not only has Magnusson failed to provide positive arguments for symmetry, his negative arguments against asymmetry have failed. Given his misstep regarding the logic/axiology distinction, his only considerable arguments against P1 ended up being the counterintuitiveness objection and the claim about Benatar being answerable for the IAs. As shown, neither of these was particularly meritorious. Furthermore, given that the literature arguably lacks defences of symmetry that match the prowess of AAA, it seems that the pronatalist must reorganise and plan a novel attack strategy if she wishes to uphold her position.

In sum, Magnusson's second argument fails because it is incompatible with the truth of P1, which is what Magnusson must accept for the sake of argument in order to target P2. Magnusson proposes two escape routes from this problem: either repurpose the argument as an objection to P1 or show that it is in fact not incompatible with P1. I showed that Magnusson's attempt at the latter fails. He tries to escape the misstep of claiming that (2) has an advantage over (4) by first combining (1) with (2) and (3) with (4), thereby concealing the zero-valued (4) in the comparison. This does not remove the fact that he is still (indirectly) comparing (2) with (4) and inferring that the latter is better than the former. The repurposing strategy fails as well, since the argument essentially collapses into an outright denial of P1 on logical grounds. This is not an effective objection, since Benatar is not making a logical claim but an axiological one, and a logical imbalance is thus an expected effect of AA. I noted that unless Magnusson can

show why axiological symmetry is more plausible than asymmetry, his second argument fails just like his first. What about the third objection, the rejection of P3?

3.3 Rejecting Magnusson's Objection to P3

Unfortunately for Magnusson, his third argument is weaker still. In fact, it is hardly an argument. It is more or less an unwitting paraphrase of what Benatar himself says in BNHB and elsewhere. As noted in section 3, what Magnusson calls P3 is actually not a part of AAA at all. Recall that, according to Magnusson, P3 of AAA says,

That coming into existence is always a net harm entails that it is always wrong to procreate. (Magnusson, 2019, p. 675)

This is blatantly wrong. All along, AAA has claimed to show that coming into existence is always a harm, not that procreating is always wrong. (Benatar, 2006, pp. 98-99) AAA ends with P2. Benatar acknowledges in BNHB that, though AAA shows that coming into existence is always a harm, if that harm is minor enough “to be outweighed by the benefits to the parents and others”, then procreation could still be permissible. (ibid.) For example, if the harm inflicted on X by bringing her into existence is -50 units, but benefits such as joy, pleasure, and relief enjoyed by those affected by the birth is +150 units, then bringing X into existence could arguably be permissible. This is where Benatar's second argument, QoLA,

comes into play. It shows that the harm of coming into existence is always so great that it cannot be outweighed in this way. (Benatar, 2015, p. 40)

Magnusson has evidently missed the aforementioned part of BNHB, as he contends what Benatar already agreed with 13 years ago. He acknowledges QoLA by noting: “[o]f course, Benatar says a lot about how bad a typical human life is in the context of his distinct [QoLA], though the point is that he does not do so in the context of [AAA], suggesting that [AAA] must in fact rely on [QoLA] to generate its anti-natalist conclusion.” (Magnusson, 2019, p. 682) Again, this would be a noteworthy point had Benatar ever made a claim to the contrary. As it stands, the point is redundant. Still, Magnusson goes on to consider a possible Benatarian response regarding parents failing to act in the interests of their prospective children by procreating. I will not evaluate this argument nor Magnusson’s counter to it since Benatar would have no reason to employ such a response. In sum, Magnusson’s third argument is thoroughly moot, as it disputes a point which Benatar never asserted in the first place.

3.4 Rejecting (Some of) Magnusson’s Conclusions

In the concluding section of his paper, Magnusson does acknowledge that Benatar has said that AAA cannot generate antinatalism independently. However, Magnusson implies that this is a recent change in Benatar’s argument:

In the latest restatement of his view, Benatar seems to concede this point, arguing that while [AAA] is sufficient to show that coming into existence is

always a harm, “it is not sufficient to show that bringing someone into existence is always *wrong*.” (ibid., citing Benatar, 2015, p. 40)

As discussed, this is not a new concession as Benatar already made this point clear in BNHB. Regardless, it is strange that even with the knowledge that Benatar recently explicitly excluded P3 from AAA, Magnusson still argues against it. Alas, he does so and then goes on to make two concluding remarks about the relationship between AAA and QoLA. I will evaluate these conclusions next.

First, Magnusson claims that, “while Benatar initially presents [AAA and QoLA] as independent arguments, we can now see that [AAA] relies on [QoLA] in at least two important ways.” (ibid., p. 683) Again, I doubt Benatar would agree that the arguments were presented as independent in the sense Magnusson implies. Although Benatar thinks that QoLA can independently generate antinatalism, he has never (to my knowledge) claimed the same about AAA.¹⁴ Still, this is one of the two dependencies Magnusson suggests: AAA depends on QoLA to generate antinatalism. As discussed, Benatar never claims otherwise.

The other purported dependency is more contentious. Magnusson argues that AAA depends on QoLA to establish that the benefits of existence (quadrant (2)) are always outweighed by the harms of existence (quadrant (1)). This is basically what Magnusson’s rejection of P2 was supposed to show. As I have argued, although QoLA can be used to establish the claim, it is not *necessary*. As we saw,

¹⁴ Indeed, in BNHB, Benatar (2006, p. 61) notes that QoLA can be seen either as an independent argument or as a *continuation of AAA*.

Benatar does not need to establish that (2) necessarily outweighs (1), since comparing (A) with (B) in this way is at odds with the truth of AA. That is, whether or not (2) outweighs (1), (2) is nevertheless not an advantage over (4), and thus AAA stands.¹⁵

So, the first point Magnusson makes about the relationship between AAA and QoLA is that the former depends on the latter in the two ways just discussed. The second point is that, “while [AAA] relies on the truth of [QoLA], the truth of [QoLA] would seem to render [AAA] unnecessary.” (ibid., p. 683) Further, Magnusson argues that since QoLA can explain why procreation is wrong without even having to compare existence to non-existence, “it is not clear what role [AAA] is playing in Benatar's overall case for anti-natalism”. (ibid.)

It is true that QoLA can, according to Benatar, generate antinatalism on its own and that AAA is thus not strictly necessary. However, especially considering the structure of Magnusson's paper, it is somewhat incongruous for him to dismiss AAA as utterly pointless. After all, in his rejection of AAA, he himself makes three distinct arguments. He does this presumably in the interest of thoroughness and to ensure that AAA remains disproved even if one or two of his objections fail. It is strange, then, that he questions the fact that Benatar has presented two arguments for the same conclusion.¹⁶ Just as Socrates makes several distinct arguments for the immortality of the soul in the *Phaedo*, so too does Benatar

¹⁵ For more on this point, see section 3.2.

¹⁶ In fact, he has presented at least three distinct arguments for antinatalism. Benatar (2015, pp. 78-111) presents a misanthropic argument that can allegedly generate antinatalism independently of AAA and QoLA.

make several antinatalist arguments, and that does not necessarily mean any of them are redundant.¹⁷ If QoLA was somehow definitively disproved, then at least AAA would still show that procreation can be wrong depending on the magnitude of harm experienced by the prospective person.¹⁸ Furthermore, AAA is not only useful as part of an antinatalist argument but as an explanation to the IAs and to issues like the non-identity problem. These are non-negligible feats, and thus even if QoLA is an impeccable argument and definitively proves antinatalism, AAA still has considerable merit in other contexts.

4. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I showed that Magnusson's refutation of the axiological asymmetry argument for antinatalism fails. After summarising AAA and some of the reasons to accept it, I analysed and rejected all three of Magnusson's objections. I argued that the objection to P1 mistakes Benatar's axiological claim for a logical one and therefore misses its mark. I then showed that, although Magnusson has to accept P1 for the sake of argument in order to advance his second objection, that objection is in fact incompatible with the truth of P1. I noted Magnusson's suggestion to repurpose his second argument as an objection to P1 but showed that it fails for the same reason as his first argument did. Magnusson's third objection is his weakest one, as it effectively argues a point which Benatar has never disputed, namely that AAA alone cannot generate

¹⁷ On the contrary, if several strong arguments reach the same conclusion, it seems there is all the more reason to take that conclusion seriously.

¹⁸ Add to this the fact that it is impossible to know the magnitude of harm prospectively and Benatar might be able to reach antinatalism without QoLA by claiming that AAA is true and that to *risk* inflicting a lot of harm on someone is morally wrong. See Benatar (2015, p. 65) for more on this risk-based line.

antinatalism. Finally, I questioned Magnusson's conclusions, arguing against the idea that AAA is utterly unnecessary since Benatar's QoLA can allegedly generate antinatalism independently. I conclude that, despite the efforts of Magnusson and many others to reject Benatar's asymmetry argument, AAA still stands.

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