



Schopenhauer and anti-natalism

Christopher Janaway

To cite this article: Christopher Janaway (05 Dec 2025): Schopenhauer and anti-natalism, British Journal for the History of Philosophy, DOI: [10.1080/09608788.2025.2589084](https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2025.2589084)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09608788.2025.2589084>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 05 Dec 2025.



Submit your article to this journal 



Article views: 947



View related articles 



View Crossmark data 

ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS



Check for updates

Schopenhauer and anti-natalism

Christopher Janaway 

Department of Philosophy, University of Southampton, Southampton, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper assesses the common assertion that Arthur Schopenhauer holds a position similar to David Benatar's anti-natalism: (1) Never-existing is preferable to coming into existence as a human individual; (2) There is a moral duty not to bring human individuals into existence. Evidence of Schopenhauer's acceptance of (1) is fairly strong. However, a possible reading of Schopenhauer calls this into question. The 'highest good' of negation of the will may constitute a higher good than never-existing. Schopenhauer rejects (2). In his view, there cannot be a general moral duty not to procreate. Compassion provides a reason not to procreate, but the potential for one's eventual offspring to reach salvation through will-lessness provides a contrasting reason to procreate. The paper questions the assumption that Schopenhauer's sole standard of evaluation is hedonic: that individuals will suffer is not necessarily the decisive factor in whether it is good to bring them into existence. Suffering is instrumentally valuable towards negation of the will. We should see Schopenhauer as writing perspectively, presenting points of view for and against anti-natalism. For contemporary readers who dismiss Schopenhauer's metaphysics, the anti-natalist strand becomes salient; but Schopenhauer's metaphysics is for him a higher standpoint and is not decisively anti-natalist.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 26 August 2025; Revised 6 November 2025; Accepted 9 November 2025

KEYWORDS Schopenhauer; Benatar; anti-natalism; procreation; suffering

1. Introduction

In his much-discussed book, *Better Never to Have Been*, David Benatar argues for anti-natalism, according to which "there is a (moral) duty not to procreate" (Benatar, *Better Never*, 14), a duty which applies to all human agents with respect to any possible offspring. This claim is grounded in the alleged truth that coming into existence is always a harm.¹ Benatar uses

CONTACT Christopher Janaway  cjanaway@soton.ac.uk  Department of Philosophy, University of Southampton, Avenue Campus, Southampton, SO17 1BJ, UK

¹I restrict myself here to so-called 'philanthropic' anti-natalist arguments, which "focus on the harm done to individuals who are brought into existence", as opposed to 'misanthropic' arguments which "appeal to the harm that individuals who are brought into existence will cause" (Louheed, "Anti-Natalism").

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

pain and pleasure as “exemplars of harms and benefits” (*Better Never*, 30).² The governing question is whether there is any life whose balance between pleasure and pain is such that living that life is better than never existing. Benatar’s answer is ‘No’. It is important that for Benatar the issue does not concern the contrast between existence and non-existence *tout court*. What matters is specifically the contrast between existing and *never-existing*.³ Benatar does not argue that, for someone who exists, it is always better to cease existing than to carry on existing. So he does not argue that we have a general duty to end our own or anyone’s existence, or even that everyone’s ceasing to exist would be better than their continuing to exist. What he claims is that we have a duty not to bring new human beings into existence, because that existence will in all cases be worse for those beings than their never-existing. His chief argument is from an asymmetry between a person’s existing and their never-existing. He argues that once the person exists, the occurrence of pleasure for them is good, and the occurrence of pain for them is bad; that, by contrast, if a person never-exists, then neither pleasure nor pain occur for them; but that in the latter case, while the pain’s not occurring is good, the pleasure’s not occurring is not bad. So, however much good there is for the existent person, there is always some bad, whereas had they never-existed, nothing would be bad for them. Furthermore, Benatar argues, there is in fact more suffering in life than we are likely to realize because we are prone to psychological biases that lead to our discounting negative features of life. These, including the so-called ‘Pollyanna principle’ that disposes us psychologically towards optimism, can explain why anti-natalism always tends to be seen as counterintuitive (See Benatar, *Better Never*, 64–9).

I shall not respond directly to Benatar’s arguments here,⁴ because my primary interest is in the following question: Is Schopenhauer an anti-natalist? Is he, as is commonly assumed, a direct precursor of Benatar who, despite coming at the issue with a metaphysics and ethics very different from Benatar’s, nonetheless coincides with his anti-natalism? Or are Schopenhauer’s markedly divergent metaphysical and ethical assumptions sufficient to motivate withholding the label ‘anti-natalist’ from him? In Section 2 below, I begin by briefly documenting the prevailing view that Schopenhauer is an anti-natalist precursor to Benatar. Thereafter, I introduce a series of factors that arguably

²As Hallich (“Argument from Asymmetry”, 6) observes, in using pain and pleasure as ‘exemplars’, Benatar does not commit himself to a hedonist axiology. The more general point is that “all lives contain substantial amounts of *whatever is thought bad*” (Benatar, *Better Never*, 88, my emphasis), and that, if someone never comes into existence, the resulting absence of *whatever is thought good* is not bad.

³In what follows I shall use this hyphenated term ‘never-existing’ in order to keep the issue firmly in focus.

⁴For recent collections of articles debating Benatar’s position, see Hallich and Hauskeller, *Would It Be Better*; Metz, *Contemporary Anti-Natalism*. Magnusson (“Risk-Based Arguments”, 101–2) lists objections that have been made to Benatar’s claims. See also the summary of debates in Lougheed, “Anti-Natalism”.

place a distance between their two positions. In Section 3, I point out that there is a sense in which our never-existing is not a genuine possibility for Schopenhauer, because our true ‘essence in itself’ lies outside of time and is subject neither to coming-to-be nor to ceasing-to-be. In Section 4, I show that Schopenhauer’s philosophical pessimism does not give rise to a general moral duty to refrain from bringing human beings into existence, because he rejects the notion of a moral ‘ought’ altogether and holds that we can have duties only if we contractually enter into them. However, these two divergences are compatible with the view that Schopenhauer is a kind of anti-natalist. Though he does not think we absolutely come into existence, and does not hold there is a duty not to procreate, he nonetheless holds that human individuals, as part of the world of appearances, come into existence, and he states that ideally rational and compassionate human beings would refrain from reproducing such individuals. So, as I argue in Section 5, the factors so far cited do not prevent Schopenhauer from holding a kind of anti-natalism with respect to individual human existence – which is the only relevant kind of existence for Benatar. Moreover, Schopenhauer states that a hypothetical universal abstinence from human reproduction would be an ideal moral good on philanthropic grounds. Schopenhauer also arguably has grounds for saying that procreation is morally wrong (though it is never present in the lists he gives of morally wrong actions). So there is clearly a moral anti-natalist argument in Schopenhauer.

In Sections 6 onwards, I turn to some potentially more convincing grounds for distancing Schopenhauer from anti-natalism. In Section 6, I consider his pronouncement that if anything can be called the highest good, it is the negation of the will. Since negation of the will and its resulting state of will-lessness can occur only for an already existing human individual, one possible interpretation is that in Schopenhauer’s view an existence in which this negation occurs is a higher good than never-existing. In that case, a blanket judgement that never-existing is better than existing could not be made. But the evidence is equivocal: on another reading, Schopenhauer’s ‘highest good’ pertains only to what is attainable for existing beings, in which case their never-existing can still be preferable. In Section 7, I turn to Schopenhauer’s views about suffering and procreation, showing that he regards both as having benefits because they potentially promote negation of the will. Despite implicitly assuming that suffering is bad in itself, he also regards it as an instrumental good in that it can be an important route to redemption. Suffering can after all be compensated, not at all by the pleasure of satisfying desires, but by suffering’s leading to a transcendence of willing in someone who remains in existence as a conscious subject. Schopenhauer also remarks that human procreation is itself beneficial because it gives rise to the future potential of the will’s denying itself in new individuals. Thus both suffering and procreation turn out to be instrumentally

valuable towards the highest good, rather than something to be avoided through total abstinence. Schopenhauer does not treat the prevention of suffering or the diminution of its quantity as the sole criteria of value. Coming into existence and bringing others into existence both have value as means through which the final good of salvation may come about. In Section 8, I conclude that Schopenhauer's thought contains evidence that points towards anti-natalism and evidence that points away from it. We should arguably see Schopenhauer as writing perspectively, presenting both a point of view from which a non-prescriptive anti-natalism is true in respect of individual human existence and a perspective from which life contains potential values that never-existing would genuinely deprive us of. The discussion also calls into question the common assumption that Schopenhauer's sole standard of evaluation is hedonic: that individuals will suffer is not necessarily the decisive factor in whether it is good to bring them into existence. From the higher metaphysical point of view to which Schopenhauer ultimately attaches greater significance, what matters is that the will to life should press forward towards its own negation.

2. Schopenhauer and Benatar assimilated

Benatar makes several citations of “the great philosophical pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer” (Benatar, *Better Never*, 76), which seemingly function to add heft to his position, at least in a rhetorical sense. Benatar cites passages in which Schopenhauer says that striving is constant in human life, that happiness or pleasure is merely a passing relief from suffering, that given the abundant empirical evidence of the world’s hospitals, battlefields, and the like, optimism is a bitter mockery, that life is an unprofitable episode with untroubled non-existence on either side of it, and that if human beings were purely rational they would not choose to bring more human beings into existence (see Benatar 2006, 60, 76–7, 89, 163). Benatar could have cited further passages which are quite well known. In *Parerga and Paralipomena* Schopenhauer says “a mature weighing of the matter yields the result that complete non-being would be preferable to an existence like ours” (PP 2, 242/SW 6, 285).⁵ *The World as Will and Representation* contains the memorable pronouncements that “life is a business that does not cover its costs” (WWR 2, 589/SW 3, 658), that “our condition is so miserable that complete non-being would be decidedly preferable” (WWR 1, 350/SW 2: 383), that “[a]t bottom, we are something that should not have been” (WWR 2, 523/SW 3, 581), and that it would even be better for nothing to have existed:

⁵References to Schopenhauer’s works give the page number of the relevant Cambridge translation followed by the volume and page number in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Hübscher.

If ... the evil were a hundred times less in the world than is the case, then the mere existence of evil would still be sufficient to ground a truth that can be expressed in different ways although only ever somewhat indirectly, namely that we should be sorry rather than glad about the existence of the world; that its non-existence would be preferable to its existence; that it is something that fundamentally should not be, etc.

(WWR 2, 591–2/SW 3: 661)

This is indeed philosophical pessimism, which combines two related claims:⁶

Descriptive claim: In existence as such there is suffering whose badness nothing can compensate for.

Evaluative claim: Never-existing is better than existing.

Either from reading Benatar or directly from the independent evidence of Schopenhauer's works, one may form the conviction that their two positions are closely akin. For example, Oliver Hallich and Michael Hauskeller write that:

Benatar can be seen as a successor to the famous philosophical pessimist Arthur Schopenhauer ... in that he sees human life as a nightmarish time of grave but senseless suffering that no one, if he could choose, would rationally prefer to prenatal non-existence. Bringing people into existence is like punishing the innocent: it means inflicting pain on those who have neither deserved it nor consented to it

(Hallich and Hauskeller, "Introduction", 2–3).

The main difference they see is that Benatar "defends these views in the clear argumentative style of analytic philosophy" (Hallich and Hauskeller, "Introduction", 3), and "shows no interest in metaphysics and the puzzling and rather disconcerting question why the world is as bad as it is" (Hauskeller, "Anti-natalism", 22).⁷ Faith L. Brown also writes that "much of the ideas found in anti-natalism were expressed historically by the nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer" ("Anti-natalism": 319). For Michael Cholbi, "If Arthur Schopenhauer has a contemporary philosophical doppelgänger, it is ... David Benatar" ("Schopenhauer", 141). And Masahiro Morioka writes that "it was Schopenhauer who boldly combined ... two types of proto-antinatalism" ("What is Antinatalism?", 8), the two types

⁶For similar statements of philosophical pessimism, see Plümacher *Pessimismus*, 1; Hassan, *Nietzsche's Struggle*, 34. 'Nothing can compensate for the badness of suffering' can be read either in quantitative terms – suffering is bad and there will always be more of it – or, as in the passage above, in terms of the mere existence of suffering – existing with any suffering at all is worse than never-existing. On the latter kind of compensation argument, see Simmons, "A Thousand Pleasures"; Bather Woods, "Standard Interpretation".

⁷Hauskeller adds that "unlike Schopenhauer, [Benatar] does not believe that our salvation lies in total annihilation, for one thing because he does not find the prospect of ending our existence at all desirable, and for another because he does not believe that salvation is possible for those of us who have the misfortune of already existing" ("Anti-natalism", 22). This is questionable: Schopenhauerian salvation is possible for those of us who already exist, and does not lie in total annihilation, rather in existing in a state of will-less consciousness.

being ‘birth negation’ (it would be better not to have been born), which is found in the Greek tradition, e.g. in Sophocles’ *Oedipus at Colonus* and Nietzsche’s “wisdom of Silenus”;⁸ and ‘reincarnation negation’ (it would be better not to be reborn), as in Buddhism. There is, then, some consensus that Schopenhauer belongs (at least by retrospective co-option) in the anti-natalist camp. And, as we have seen, there is strong evidence from his writings that he holds never-existing to be preferable to existence. It is worth citing a final passage where Schopenhauer reflects on the death of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s one-day-old son:

[I]t is clear as day that anyone who could have first seen and looked the gift [of life] over would have said “no thank you very much”; just as Lessing was amazed by the understanding of his son who had not wanted to come into the world at all, needed to be violently pulled out with forceps, and hardly was he there before he hurried out again. It will be objected that life should only be a lesson from one end to the other, to which however anyone can reply: “And this is exactly why I wanted [*wollte*] to be left in the peace of the all-sufficient nothing where I did not need of lessons or anything else.”

(WWR 2, 595/SW 3, 665)

This passage brings out the potential paradox involved in thinking about anti-natalism: for it is obvious that *there is no one* who could have said ‘no thank you’ to life or have been content with never-existing.⁹ Still, the striking phrase “peace of the all-sufficient nothing” [*Ruhe des all-genugsamen Nichts*] is evocative of a commitment on Schopenhauer’s part to the view that never-existing is preferable to being born.

3. Our ‘true essence’ does not come into existence

Haller and Hauskeller noted how Schopenhauer’s metaphysics constitutes an obvious divergence from Benatar, but maintained that both share a commitment to anti-natalism. However, one element of Schopenhauer’s metaphysics that at least complicates the question is his view that ultimately, considered as what we are in ourselves, we neither cease nor begin to exist. If we cannot be brought into existence, then there can be no duty not to bring us into existence. Schopenhauer argues that the individual human being is real only from the empirical perspective (real as appearance), and that by contrast what we are from an absolute metaphysical perspective (what we are in ourselves) is something that is not destroyed by the individual’s passing into non-existence. While his focus is on our not falling into

⁸See Sophocles, *Theban Plays*, 358; Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 23.

⁹As Mor Segev has pointed out (private communication), in the Lessing’s son example there was an existent someone who figuratively at least ‘said no thank you’ to life. But Schopenhauer’s point concerning someone who “could have first seen and looked the gift over” is easily read counter-factually as: ‘if it were possible for a not-yet-existing person to choose whether to exist, that person would have chosen not to exist’.

complete non-existence after death, his account commits him also to the claim that what we truly are (from the absolute metaphysical perspective) does not *begin* to exist when the individual human being begins. He is especially disapproving of the asymmetrical Christian doctrine that we come into existence out of nothing but then continue to exist for all eternity: “to teach people that they have only recently come into being out of nothing, and consequently have been nothing for an eternity and yet will be imperishable in the future” is, he says, an “untenable” doctrine (WWR 2, 481/SW 3, 529). By contrast,

Brahmanism and Buddhism¹⁰ will achieve much more by teaching people to think of themselves as the primordial being itself, the Brahman, to which all coming to be and passing away is essentially alien, than will those religions that have people coming from nothing and truly beginning an existence received from others at birth.

(WWR 2, 480/SW 3: 529)

In *Parerga and Paralipomena* he says likewise that “Your essence in itself ... knows neither time, nor beginning, nor end, nor the bounds of a given individuality” (PP 2, 252/SW 6, 297).

As is quite well known, Schopenhauer holds that the world as it is in itself is outside of space and time and not subject to individuation. Space and time constitute the principle of individuation that necessarily governs all our experience; but because space and time apply *only* to what falls within experience, while the thing in itself by definition cannot fall within experience, Schopenhauer holds that the thing in itself must be conceived as existing timelessly and undivided. If human beings are each something in themselves, what they are in themselves must be common to them all and not subject to any temporal process. Schopenhauer invokes the Brahman of the Upaniṣads because it is the absolute reality which, in Advaita Vedānta’s reading at least, ‘has no second’ (the meaning of *advaita*) and is identical with the self of every individual. Schopenhauer is aware of this doctrine and often quotes the Upaniṣadic saying *tat tvam asi* (“You are that”) which is held to assert this very identity.¹¹ He explains that in his usage, “the word ‘I’ contains a huge equivocation Depending on how I understand this word, I can say: ‘death is my total end’, but also: ‘my personal appearance is just as small a part of my true being as I am an infinitely small part of the world’” (WWR 2, 507/SW 3, 562).¹² Schopenhauer’s concern is to provide consoling thoughts that will combat the innate fear of death. On

¹⁰Here Schopenhauer erroneously drags Buddhism into the metaphysics that is characteristic of the Upaniṣads and Advaita Vedānta.

¹¹See WWR 1, 382, 401/SW 2: 420, 442; OBM, 254/SW 4, 271.

¹²Schopenhauer caricatures this duality of perspectives in a dialogue which begins: “Thrasymachus: Briefly, what am I after my death? Clearly and precisely! Philalethes: Everything and nothing” (PP 2, 251/SW 6, 296–7).

the one hand, as an individual you *cease* to exist: death is “the great opportunity not to be I any longer” (WWR 2, 524/SW 3, 582). On the other hand, you *do not* cease to exist at death:

Dying is the moment of that liberation from the one-sidedness of an individuality that does not constitute the innermost kernel of our essence, but should rather be viewed as a kind of straying from our essence: it is at this moment that true, primordial freedom returns and so it is this moment that can be regarded, in the sense described, as a “restitution of wholeness”

(WWR 2, 524/SW 3, 582–3).

Therefore, caring about the cessation of your individual existence “would seem childish and utterly ridiculous to you if you could know your own essence totally and down to its foundation, namely as the universal will to life that is you” (PP 2, 254/SW 6, 300).¹³ All of this differentiates Schopenhauer’s position rather drastically from Benatar’s. In terms of ultimate reality, individuals and their comings into and out of existence are illusory. The real is a timelessly existing ‘will to life’ (*Wille zum Leben*) that manifests itself in appearance as a plurality of striving and suffering individuals. So in a sense for Schopenhauer, in terms of ultimate metaphysical truth, our never-existing cannot be better than our existing – because it is not even a possibility.

However, even if this metaphysics of the thing in itself were persuasive, it would not be sufficient to distance Schopenhauer from Benatar’s anti-natalism. Because, of course, Benatar’s view concerns only the comparative values of temporal coming-into-existence as an empirical human individual versus never-existing as such an individual. Schopenhauer holds that human individuals exist empirically as spatio-temporal appearances, that they come into existence at some time, and that each of them might never have existed as an individual. Moreover, he shares Benatar’s comparative value-calculation, describing existing as an individual as a “false step”, something that should not be, and individuality as “not a perfection, but a limitation, hence to be rid of it is not a loss but rather a gain” (PP 2, 254/SW 6, 300). What matters most for present purposes is that for Schopenhauer, as for Benatar, the human individual might never have existed, and that never-existing is to be viewed as – to put it paradoxically – the great opportunity not to become I. Thus Schopenhauer seems firmly in agreement with Benatar’s evaluative claim: never-existing as a human being in the empirical realm is better than so existing. In addition, the very idea that the individual is illusory lends a deeper, metaphysical credence to anti-natalism: individual existence is seen as an aberration not only because it brings suffering but

¹³For more discussion of Schopenhauer on death, see Jacquette, “Schopenhauer on Death”; Janaway, “Schopenhauer’s Consoling View”.

because it is a straying away from the “perfection” and “wholeness” that truly constitutes reality.

4. No moral duty not to procreate

A different argument for distancing Schopenhauer’s views from Benatar’s focuses on moral duty. Even if one holds that (1) never-existing as a human individual is better than existing, there is no requirement also to hold that (2) there is a general moral duty not to bring human individuals into existence. Schopenhauer, at any rate, would argue there is no such connection. He must reject (2) for the simple reason that for him there is no such thing as a moral ‘ought’ and no such thing as an unconditional duty. Schopenhauer writes:

Separated from the theological presuppositions from which they issued, these concepts [commanding, obeying, law, duty] really lose all meaning as well, and if, like Kant, one thinks to substitute for them by speaking of an *absolute* ought and *unconditioned* duty, then one is turning the reader away with words for food, really giving him a contradiction in terms to digest. That *ought* has any sense and meaning at all only in relation to threatened punishment or promised reward

(OBM, 127–8/SW 4, 122–3).

Stephen Puryear has summarized Schopenhauer’s position thus: “[w]e can take Schopenhauer’s thesis to be ... : every binding *ought* presupposes, and is conditioned by, a threat of punishment” (Puryear, “Schopenhauer’s Rejection”, 18). Without “theological presuppositions” the requisite threat of punishment disappears and with it the requisite bindingness. Schopenhauer’s position is comparable to that of Elizabeth Anscombe in her 1958 paper “Modern Moral Philosophy”: “Schopenhauer and Anscombe agree ... that the concept of a moral *ought*, along with the concepts *moral law* and *moral imperative*, loses all sense and meaning, i.e. ceases to be intelligible, apart from a divine law conception of ethics” (Puryear, “Schopenhauer’s Rejection”, 21).¹⁴ So for Schopenhauer, who assumes there is no God, there could not be a morally binding imperative such as ‘One ought not to procreate’.

Schopenhauer does not deny that we can have duties: “duty is an action by whose mere omission one injures another, i.e. commits wrong” (OBM, 211/SW 4, 220). The relevant action here would be a refraining, the avoidance of procreation. One might think that if one wrongs a human being by failing to avoid

¹⁴Puryear (“Schopenhauer’s Rejection”, 21) points out a difference between Schopenhauer and Anscombe. The latter thinks the moral sense of ‘ought’ should be jettisoned for historical and psychological reasons: we are no longer capable of believing in it if the divine law conception of ethics is a thing of the past. Schopenhauer thinks in addition that the moral sense of ‘ought’ is incoherent as such.

bringing them into life, then one has a duty to avoid bringing them into life. However, Schopenhauer explains that in his view wronging someone by mere omission:

can be the case only by the omitter's having undertaken to do such an action, i.e. by his having precisely *obliged* himself to do it. Consequently all duties rest upon an obligation entered into. This obligation is as a rule an explicit, mutual agreement, as e.g. between prince and people, government and civil servant, master and servant, advocate and client, doctor and the sick, in general between anyone who has taken on any kind of provision and his customer, in the broadest sense of the word

(OBM, 211/SW 4, 220–1)

Elsewhere he proposes that “duty [*Pflicht*] presupposes obligation [*Verpflichtung*], i.e. the acceptance of duty” (OBM, 129/SW 4, 124). Thus one might in some circumstances acquire a duty not to procreate, for example by binding oneself in an agreement with a long-term sexual partner or in a vow required by a religious order one belongs to. But, on Schopenhauer's view, there could not be a general moral duty not to procreate.

Schopenhauer does, however, suggest one exception to this claim, which is intriguing in the present context: if one *has* offspring, one automatically has duties towards them: “Whoever puts a child into the world has the *duty* to maintain it until it is capable of maintaining itself” (OBM, 211/SW 4, 221). This duty is exceptional because it arises *not* through the parent's entering into an agreement, “but rather immediately through a mere action, because the one to whom one has [the obligation] was not yet there [*noch nicht dawar*] when one assumed it” (OBM, 211/SW 4: 221). Given that there is at least this one duty that is not acquired by mutual agreement, the anti-natalist reader of Schopenhauer may spot a loophole: if one can be under an obligation to a not-yet-existing person, why can one not be under an obligation to a never-existing person, i.e. the obligation not to harm them by bringing them into existence? We may suggest a reply by unpicking Schopenhauer's rather obscure reference to one's offspring's being “not yet there”. What he is describing is the case where a parent assumed or acquired (*übernahm*) an obligation. But in order for this obligation to be acquired at all, its point of acquisition must coincide in time with the offspring's beginning to *exist*, or at least some point early on in their existence. In other words, the duty in question could not obtain if procreation failed to occur. Thus in this context the offspring's being ‘not there’ does not signify their not existing, but rather their not being present as an agent with whom the parent can enter into an agreement. Schopenhauer claims that all duties are acquired at a time, usually through agreement and in one sole case through an action. But, on Schopenhauer's view, if a person never-exists, there is no time at which one can plausibly acquire a duty towards them by either means.

5. A non-prescriptive anti-natalism about individual existence

We argued that Schopenhauer's metaphysical divergence from Benatar, concerning the timeless essence of human beings, nonetheless leaves him holding that existing as a human individual is worse than never-existing as a human individual. The second divergence, his challenge to the notions of moral ought and unconditioned duty, renders it impossible for Schopenhauer to accept a general moral *duty* not to procreate. However, Schopenhauer can still hold the view that refraining from procreation would be morally good, and arguably also has the resources to say that procreation is morally wrong.

Perhaps the prime exhibit for those who would place Schopenhauer firmly in the anti-natalist camp is quoted in abbreviated form by Benatar (*Better Never*, 163): “If children were brought into the world by an act of pure reason alone, would the human race continue to exist?” Here Benatar has used an extract from T. Bailey Saunders' rather scanty translation done in the 1890s (re-published as Schopenhauer, “On the Sufferings of the World”). A more recent full translation of the passage makes the point more powerfully:

One should try to imagine that the act of procreation were neither a need, nor accompanied by sexual pleasure, but instead a matter of pure, rational reflection; could [köönnte] the human race even continue to exist? Would not everyone, on the contrary, have so much compassion for the coming generation that he would rather spare it the burden of existence, or at least refuse to take it upon himself to cold-bloodedly impose it on them?

(PP 2, 270/SW 6, 318–19)

Schopenhauer is not saying that everyone ought to refrain from procreation or has a duty to do so. Technically speaking, Schopenhauer is merely posing questions here, speculating about people's possible behaviour in a counterfactual scenario, rather than passing a moral judgement. But the implication is that people would make a certain moral decision if they were motivated by pure, rational reflection. He does not believe that human beings ever will be so motivated. In general, “the intellect, like claws and teeth, is nothing other than an instrument in the service of the will” (WWR 2, 415/SW 3, 455). In particular, the very core of our nature as willing beings is what Schopenhauer calls the will to life, which manifests itself in us, as in all living things, as a drive to reproduce life: “the sex drive is the most complete expression of the will to life, the clearest expression of its type: and the origin of individuals from it as well as its primacy over all the other desires of humans in their natural state corresponds to this completely” (WWR 2, 530/SW 3, 588–9). Rationality will never have the power to argue away this primary manifestation of will to life whose function is to reproduce the species. Still, Schopenhauer is committed to the claim that, in the ideally rational scenario he hypothesizes, a universal refraining from procreation would be morally

good. We can infer this from his inclusion of *compassion* as the scenario's motivating factor.

As is well known, in Schopenhauer's view compassion [*Mitleid*] is the basis of all moral value. Compassion occurs:

if the ultimate motivating ground for an action, or an omission, resides directly and exclusively in the *well-being and woe* of someone *other* who is passively involved in it, so that, the active party has in view in his acting, or omitting, simply and solely the well-being and woe of *another* and has nothing at all as his end but that that other should remain unharmed, or indeed receive help, support and relief. *This end alone* impresses on an action or omission the stamp of *moral worth* – which thus rests exclusively on the action's occurring, or failing to occur, merely for the advantage and benefit of *another*

(OBM, 199/SW 4, 207).

Schopenhauer in effect takes morally good action to be coextensive with action whose motivating incentive is compassion. He notoriously explains compassion literally as 'suffering-with' (*mit-leiden*), saying that we "suffer *with* [the other]: ... we feel his pain as *his*" (OBM, 203/SW 4: 211). This might suggest a problem for the notion of feeling compassion for the suffering of a merely potential person: in that case there is no suffering for the moral agent to feel with. However, Schopenhauer is clear that compassion is an incentive not only to remove or alleviate suffering, but to prevent it. In its manifestation as justice, compassion "prevents me from causing a suffering to the other, in other words bringing about what is not yet the case, and myself becoming the cause of someone's else pains" (OBM, 203/SW 4, 212). So there is no problem in principle with exercising compassion towards non-existent persons whom one would harm by bringing them into existence. Thus the absence of a duty not to procreate is not sufficient to dispel anti-natalism. It is consistent with a non-prescriptive anti-natalism, which holds that bringing human individuals into existence is morally bad because it is a failure of compassion.

A case might also be made that on Schopenhauerian grounds bringing human beings into existence should be deemed morally *wrong*.¹⁵ A duty is, as we saw, "an action by whose mere omission one injures another, i.e. commits wrong" (OBM, 211/SW 4, 220). But one can of course injure someone outside of any established obligation relationship simply by committing an act that has a bad effect on them. Schopenhauer sometimes provides lists of actions that are morally wrong: e.g. cannibalism, murder, bodily injury, subjugation, removal of property (WWR 1, 361–2/SW 2, 395), and lying (WWR 1, 364/SW 2, 399). He does not mention procreation as an example of wrong action, but could he have done so? He gives two different explanations of the concept *wrong* [*Unrecht*], one tighter and one looser. In the tighter conception, wrong consists in someone's "affirming his own will above and

¹⁵I am grateful to a referee for this journal for suggesting this line of argument.

beyond its appearance, to the point of negating the other's will" (WWR 1, 362–3/SW 2: 397) or "violation of the boundaries of someone else's affirmation of will" (WWR 1, 360/SW 2, 394). Note that on this conception something can be *morally bad* – even in the extreme – without being *wrong*: "denying help to those in urgent need, calmly observing someone starve to death while you have more than enough, although cruel and diabolical, are not wrong" (WWR 1, 365/SW 2, 400). Schopenhauer takes it that in these cases of non-intervention, there is no active affirmation of will to the detriment of the sufferer. By contrast, procreation cannot escape wrongness on these grounds, because it, of all things, is a decided affirmation of the will. But in all the cases Schopenhauer considers in connection with this understanding of *wrong*, there is an extant individual who has a will upon which the agent can actively encroach. Does it make sense to say that by bringing someone into existence I negate or violate *their will*?

It is not entirely clear how to frame an answer to this question. An existing person may form the wish not to have existed, but it is unclear how I can have violated that later wish by bringing the person into existence, and besides, there is a good probability that any person I bring into existence will not actually form such a wish. As we saw with the case of Lessing's son, Schopenhauer is prepared to imagine a newborn *wanting* (in some sense other than conscious desire) to be left in the peace of an "all-sufficient nothing". If it makes sense to posit will here, then perhaps I would be negating that will by affirming my own will to reproduce, thus wronging the newborn. But on the other hand, when Schopenhauer is giving serious consideration to the metaphysics of reproduction, he insists that "The growing attraction of two lovers is in fact already the life-will [*Lebenswill*] of the new individual who they can and want to conceive" (WWR 2, 552/SW 3, 613), and that the Idea of a new individual "strives as avidly and vehemently as possible to be realized in appearance" (WWR 2, 553/SW 3: 614). By asserting one's own will to *refrain* from producing offspring with one's beloved, one would be negating the life-will that is striving to be a new individual. This could suggest that failure to reproduce in the optimal circumstances would be a kind of wrong – the reverse of anti-natalism. On this first definition of wrong as violating the will of another, it is not clear that Schopenhauer can say that procreation is wrong.

Elsewhere Schopenhauer has a looser conception of wrong: "The concepts *wrong* and *right* [are] synonymous with injury and non-injury" (OBM 208/SW 4, 218); "The concept of wrong is ... equivalent to injury in the broadest sense" (PP2, 218/SW 6, 257). In *The World as Will and Representation* he at one point equates "doing no wrong" with "not injuring" (WWR 1, 397/SW2, 438).¹⁶ Now in his discussions of wronging someone Schopenhauer is

¹⁶'Injury' translates *Verletzung*. I have modified the Cambridge translation which gives "failing to cause harm" for *Nichtverletzen* at WWR 1, 397/SW2: 438.

not thinking about procreation. His categories of injury “can concern either the person [*die Person*], the property or honour” (PP2, 218/SW 6, 257). But if injury can be extended to cover bringing about a state in which someone is bound to suffer, there is a case for saying that Schopenhauer ought to say not only that avoiding procreation would be morally good, but that practising it is wrong. A further unclarity, however, is whether he could extend moral wrongness to every act of procreation (or even every act of intentional procreation). What counts morally for Schopenhauer is the will from which an action springs. The relevant “incentives” (*Triebfeder*) are egoism, malice, and compassion, which are modes of willing either “one’s own well-being”, “someone else’s woe”, or “someone else’s well-being” (OBM 201/SW 4, 210). A procreative act that was neither egoistic nor malicious might be such as to result in injury to the offspring, but that would not be sufficient for it to be a morally bad act. For example, if one acted to bring about a conception in someone whose life one wanted thereby to improve or even save, thus solely pursuing someone else’s well-being, Schopenhauer should call that action a morally good one. Schopenhauer’s ideally rational and compassionate human beings would arguably be doing wrong if, holding the torment of existence of the offspring to outweigh any benefit to the parent, they went ahead with procreation for selfish or malicious reasons. But Schopenhauer is not in a position to say that every act of procreation is morally wrong.

The evidence considered so far supports the consensus view that Schopenhauer is an anti-natalist: never-existing is preferable to temporal human existence, it would be morally good not to bring human individuals into existence, and potentially morally wrong to do so, at least for ideal human beings who acted rationally on the belief that non-existence is preferable to existence. However, there is also evidence that seems to point away from anti-natalism, and to that we now turn.

6. Negation of the will as the highest good

In a prominent but perplexing passage in *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer presents an account of a *summum bonum* or ‘highest good’. One way of interpreting this passage produces an argument against classifying Schopenhauer as an anti-natalist. Here is the passage:

if we would like to retain an old expression [*summum bonum*] out of habit, giving it honorary or emeritus status, as it were, we might, by way of a trope and figuratively, call the complete self-abolition and negation of the will, the true absence of will [*die gänzliche Selbtaufhebung und Verneinung des Willens, die wahre Willenslosigkeit*], the only thing that can staunch and appease the impulses of the will forever, the only thing that can give everlasting contentment, the only thing that can redeem the world, ... – we might call this the

absolute good, the *summum bonum*. We can look upon it as the one radical cure for the disease against which all other goods – such as fulfilled wishes and achieved happiness – are only palliatives, only anodynes

(WWR 1, 389/SW 2, 428, translation modified)

Although this is the only passage in Schopenhauer's published works where he propounds anything as a 'highest good' in so many words (whether figuratively or literally),¹⁷ it is in line with other statements he makes concerning will-lessness or negation of the will, such as its being "the highest moral goal" (PP 2, 279/SW 6, 328), and "infinitely superior to everything else" (WWR 1, 417/SW 2, 461). Schopenhauer's many discussions of what he calls "true salvation, redemption from life and from suffering", which he says is "unthinkable without the complete negation of the will" (WWR 1, 424/SW 2: 470), make it abundantly clear that it is an occurrence in the consciousness of a human subject. To attain salvation one must first exist, then undergo a transformation in consciousness following which one no longer wills. Never-existing therefore rules out the highest good of salvation from life and suffering. One could, of course, have been saved entirely from life and from suffering by virtue of never-existing, so one might expect never-existing to be a contender for the title of highest good – but Schopenhauer does not characterize it in those terms. On the one hand, this might suggest that he regards never-existing as falling short of the highest good. On the other hand, the passage can be read as implying nothing concerning the value of never-existing. The explicit contrast in the passage is between the highest good and other candidate goods ("fulfilled wishes and achieved happiness") that are available only to those of us who exist. So it is arguable that by "highest good" Schopenhauer implicitly means "highest good attainable by those who exist".

Thus the passage on the highest good is equivocal. On one reading, (A) never-existing is overall the highest good, and attainment of will-lessness is a second-best to never-existing: i.e. merely the highest good possible for those of us unfortunate enough not to be "left in the peace of the all-sufficient nothing" (WWR 2, 595/SW 3, 665). This reading seems natural in light of the passages cited above, in which Schopenhauer pronounces without qualification that non-existence would have been preferable. In those passages, he does not tend to say that non-existence is preferable *unless* some higher good obtains. However, by the same token, Schopenhauer never says that never-existing is the highest good. Thus on a second reading, (B) attainment of will-lessness, which presupposes existence as a willing, suffering, and cognizing being, is overall the highest good, and

¹⁷I here bracket the issue of Schopenhauer's stated reason for employing the term *summum bonum* only figuratively, which is that it would literally signify "an ultimate satisfaction for the will, following which there would be no new willing", a situation which he describes as "unthinkable" (WWR 1, 389/SW 2, 427–8). For discussion see Janaway, "What's so Good about Negation of the Will?".

therefore a higher good than never-existing. On this reading, Schopenhauer would not be an out-and-out anti-natalist: he would regard *some* human existence as both *better than never-existing* and *necessary* for the highest good of salvation to come about. Reading (B) is consonant with an important strand in Schopenhauer's thinking which sees nature's production of the human intellect as the pinnacle of its achievement because it enables the cognitive *realization* that the world is something that should not exist. It may be useful here to consider John Atwell's interpretation of the 'single thought' that is supposed to comprise Schopenhauer's whole philosophy. On Atwell's interpretation, the world is a will which produces an intellect in some beings, and does so with an in-built teleology: "The double-sided world is the striving of the will to become fully conscious of itself so that, recoiling in horror . . . , it may annul itself and thereby its self-affirmation, and then reach salvation" (Atwell 1995, 31). The attainment of the highest good of salvation requires cognition, which requires living beings. It would be an error, Schopenhauer says, if someone sought to annul the will by means of sterilization or infanticide. Instead he should "[do] all he can to *safe-guard life* for everything that is crowding into it" (WWR 1, 427/SW 2, 474, emphasis added). He explains that:

[t]he will to life itself cannot be suppressed by anything except *cognition* [*Erkenntniß*]. That is why the only path to salvation [*Heil*] is for the will to appear without restraints, so that it can *recognize* its own essence in this appearance. Only as a result of this recognition can the will abolish itself and in so doing put an end to suffering too Nature leads the will to the light, because it is only in the light that it can find its redemption [*Erlösung*]. Thus the goals of nature must be promoted in every way as soon as the will to life, which is nature's inner essence, has arrived at a resolution

(WWR 1, 427–8/SW 2, 474).

That is to say, only through the continual creation of living beings with an intellect that can illuminate the truth can the negation of the will be attained. These remarks lend support to our reading (B) of the 'highest good' passage: attainment of the highest good of salvation or redemption through will-less-ness is incompatible with never-existing.

7. Suffering and procreation: the benefits

Although Schopenhauer regards suffering as the main "objection to life" (to use Nietzsche's later phrase), he also assigns it important instrumental value. In his oft-cited discussion of suicide Schopenhauer is quite clear that escaping suffering by voluntarily *ceasing to exist* is inferior in value to carrying on existing while experiencing suffering that has the potential for redemption: "[S]uicide is counter to achieving the highest moral goal insofar as it substitutes a merely illusory redemption from this world of misery for the real one"

(PP 2, 279/SW 6, 328). The suicidal person does not appreciate that suffering is not only an affliction but also a remedy:

[T]he very suffering that he avoids so emphatically could, in the form of a mortification of the will, have led to self-negation and redemption; which is why, in this respect, someone who commits suicide is like a sick person who, having started undergoing a painful operation that could cure him completely, does not allow it to be completed and would rather stay sick

(WWR 1, 426–7/SW 2, 472–3).

So even though suffering is assumed to be intrinsically bad, preventing it is not always the decisive concern: its intrinsic badness can be trumped by its potential instrumental value in leading to the highest good.

In the discussion of suicide Schopenhauer thus argues that even intense suffering does not give decisive reason against someone's *continuing to exist*. Can he argue – contrary to anti-natalism – that intense suffering does not give a decisive reason against someone's *coming into existence*? Schopenhauer presents two 'paths to salvation', each of which essentially involves the occurrence suffering:

[T]he negation of the will to life, which is what people call utter resignation or holiness, always comes from ... recognition of the will's inner conflict and its essential nothingness, which expresses itself in the suffering of all living things. The difference that we have presented by means of two paths is whether this recognition is called into existence by suffering that is merely and purely *cognized*, and which is freely approached by our seeing through the *principium individuationis*, or whether, on the other hand, recognition comes from one's own immediate *feeling* of suffering

(WWR 1, 424/SW 2, 470).

The second path involves such intense suffering that resignation arises spontaneously within the individual. In the other path, "seeing through the *principium individuationis*" means the full grasp of the ultimately illusory nature of individuality that is achieved by the supremely compassionate person. Such a person "take[s] upon himself the pain of the whole world", with the result that "[t]he will begins turning away from life: it shrinks from each of the pleasures in which it sees life being affirmed. A human being achieves the state of voluntary renunciation, resignation, true composure, and complete will-less-ness" (WWR 1, 405–6/SW 2, 447–8).

Schopenhauer sums up by saying that suffering "is in fact the cleansing process through which alone, in most cases, a human being is saved, i.e. led back from the false path of the will to life" (WWR 2, 652/SW 3, 731). Then he adds, "This is why the salutary nature of the cross and of suffering is mentioned so frequently in Christian devotional literature, and it is very fitting that the cross, an instrument of suffering undergone ... is the symbol of the Christian religion" (WWR 2, 652/SW 3, 731). Schopenhauer

regards certain elements of Christianity as an allegorical representation of truths presented in his own philosophy. Christianity, he claims,

taught the great truth of the affirmation and negation of the will to life, in the guise of allegory, saying that everyone was cursed by Adam's Fall so that sin entered the world and everyone inherited the guilt; while claiming on the other hand that everyone's sins were expiated by Jesus' sacrificial death, the world redeemed, the guilt removed, and justice reconciled

(WWR 2, 643/SW 3, 722).

Elsewhere he invokes the Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, who "said something that is in accordance with the whole view presented here ... 'the fastest animal to carry you to perfection is suffering'" (WWR 2, 649/SW 3, 729). If Schopenhauer's notion of redemption or salvation follows a Christian pattern, there is a way of contrasting the value of negation of the will with the value of never-existing. From a limited point of view which assumes merely the intrinsic badness of suffering, it would have been better for Christ never to have become human. But in Christianity redemption from sin requires that Christ be incarnated and undergo extreme suffering, because a vastly higher value is thereby attained. Likewise, while the intrinsic badness of suffering supports Schopenhauer's claim that never-existing is better for any human individual, the highest good – the negation of the will to life – requires that the will manifests itself in a human individual who reaches redemption through experiencing and understanding suffering.

Taking the analogy with Christianity seriously favours our reading (B) above: while never-existing prevents suffering, a higher value is attained – albeit very rarely – through an individual's coming into existence and gaining redemption through experiencing suffering and recognizing the truth about the world. Schopenhauer gives the all-important Fourth Book of *The World as Will and Representation* the subtitle "With the achievement of self-knowledge, affirmation and negation of the will to life" (WWR 1, 297/SW 2, 317). He attaches value not only to suffering and its absence, but to knowledge and its achievement. For Schopenhauer, the truth about the world of course includes the truth that the intrinsic badness of suffering makes non-existence preferable to existence: "There is in fact no goal to our existence except the recognition that we would have been better off not existing. But this is the most important of all truths" (WWR 2, 620–1/SW 3, 695). On the present reading, an individual's transformational *recognition* of that truth adds a value that obviously could not accrue if the individual had never-existed. And if this recognition is the *only* goal of our existence, then it cannot be the goal of our existence not to procreate. Because he does not take the presence or absence of suffering as the sole criterion of value, Schopenhauer also provides a reason why it is better that some individuals exist: they can fulfil the goal of recognizing the most

important truth about existence. On reading (B), the result is not straightforward anti-natalism.

Schopenhauer also gives direct reasons for promoting procreation. As David Bather Woods ("Schopenhauer's Sexual Ethics") has pointed out, Schopenhauer is disapproving of sexual acts that do *not* lead to reproduction, such as "onanism" and "pederasty", (OBM, 132/SW 4, 128) and in favour of heterosexual practices that do, or at least can. This puts him directly at odds with Benatar's view that "sex can be morally acceptable only if it is not reproductive" (Benatar, *Better Never*, 127). But Schopenhauer has a more specific reason for favouring reproduction, beyond the mere propagation of the human species. In recognition of this, Mor Segev has written that "despite being popularly associated with antinatalism, ... he [does not] seem to be opposed to reproduction, which he in fact finds conducive to 'salvation'" (Segev, "Schopenhauer on the inconsistency", 465). In Section 5 we argued that Schopenhauer is rightly associated with anti-natalism, in virtue of his moral argument that an ideally rational policy would be to refrain from producing new individuals out of compassion for the suffering they would endure. Yet Segev is also right to the extent that Schopenhauer is not simply opposed to reproduction. To see why, we need to grasp a little more of Schopenhauer's idiosyncratic metaphysics. Schopenhauer regards each newly existing individual as an amalgam of will and intellect (holding, for seemingly arbitrary reasons, that the former is inherited from the father, the latter from the mother).¹⁸ From his understanding of Buddhism he takes the notion of palingenesis (or rebirth),¹⁹ and contends that the same "will to life" persists through the birth, life, and death of successive individuals. The birth of each new individual unites a newly formed intellect with this persisting will to life, and thus:

life presents itself in each of them from a different side and in another light; each individual gives the will a new fundamental view of life, teaches it a new lesson. [I]ts willing is given an entirely new direction; it experiences a modification, and most important, it must either affirm life anew or negate it. As such, the natural institution of the ever changing combination of a will and an intellect ... becomes the basis for a way to salvation

(WWR 2, 545/SW 3, 605–6).

The main point for present purposes is that Schopenhauer here regards procreation as instrumentally good because it is a means to some future existing individual's reaching salvation. So is it good to bring new human beings into existence? No, if we think solely of each individual's suffering and are motivated by compassion. But Yes, if our aim is that the perpetual will to life should

¹⁸See WWR 2, 518, 533–45/SW 3, 575–6, 591–606. For comment, see Bather Woods, "Schopenhauer's Sexual Ethics", 160.

¹⁹See Langone, "Schopenhauer's Buddhism". Schopenhauer's main source is the discussion of *karma* and *upādāna* in Hardy, *A Manual* (see WWR 2, 519/SW 3, 576).

make progress towards eventually producing individuals who achieve the highest good of salvation. Once again, Schopenhauer does not treat diminishment of the amount of suffering as his sole criterion of value. He has a reason for avoiding procreation and a reason for continuing it. This at least distances him from straightforward anti-natalism. And on our reading (B), which treats negation of the will as the highest good *überhaupt*, the anti-natalist moral argument against procreation must take second place, on the ground that what it recommends hinders the progress towards potential negation of the will in future individuals. In that case, we can argue that Schopenhauer recognizes anti-natalist reasons against procreating, but gives an overriding reason in favour of procreation.

However, paradox re-surfaces here too, for if any future individual attains salvation (i.e. negation of the will to life), that future individual will altogether lose the drive to procreate. So the effect of attaining procreation's final good is the ultimate *cessation* of procreation, as Schopenhauer says: "While the will fails to negate itself, every birth provides it with a new and different intellect – until it has recognized the true nature of life and *as a result wants no more of it*" (WWR 2, 653/SW 3, 733, emphasis added). So even if there is a good in procreating that overrides the moral argument concerning the badness of the procreated individual's suffering, the underlying hope still shows anti-natalist sympathies: it is the hope that some future individual will resign from life, realize that never-existing would have been preferable, and refrain absolutely from giving life to new individuals. Nonetheless, the position here is not simple anti-natalism: the higher value lies not in potential persons' never-existing, rather in what is achieved in an existing person's consciousness – their realization that turns the will away from life.

8. Conclusion

Our question whether Schopenhauer is an anti-natalist does not have a single straightforward answer. Let us break anti-natalism down into its two main components:

- (1) Never-existing is preferable to coming into existence as a human individual.
- (2) There is a moral duty not to bring human individuals into existence.

Our most decisive conclusion has been that Schopenhauer does not support (2). For him there can be no such duty, other than by someone's undertaking to be bound by it in a particular circumstance. The furthest he explicitly goes in the direction of (2) is an argument from compassion: refraining from reproduction would be morally good, because an ideal moral agent would act out of compassion and not bring about the suffering that any

offspring would inevitably undergo. Although Schopenhauer does not pronounce procreation to be wrong, there are reasons to think that, if bringing someone into existence is injuring them, then at least some people who would be acting wrongly by bringing new individuals into existence. Some readers of Schopenhauer may be content to stop there, not taking on board Schopenhauer's metaphysics of the will, his view that individuality is illusory, his advocacy for the negation of the will as the highest good, or his particular claims concerning the instrumental value of suffering, procreation, and the continuance of the will to life. Bracketing off all those features allows a picture of Schopenhauer as an anti-natalist roughly in line with Benatar's position, though still minus the specific claim of a *duty* not to procreate. But if our interest is in understanding Schopenhauer's own unique historical contribution to pessimist debates about the values of existing and reproducing, we should not dismiss these features – which anyway belong to the core of his philosophy as a whole.

It is often assumed that Schopenhauer's only standard of value is hedonic.²⁰ On that assumption, the better course of action will be the one that diminishes suffering overall – in this case the better course will be not bringing someone into existence. But, as we have seen, Schopenhauer also offers an argument *for* procreation. For him, contrary to Benatar, sexual activity without the possibility of reproduction is deficient. He *recommends* procreation rather extravagantly, saying that one should do what one can “to safeguard life for everything that is crowding into it” (WWR 1, 427/SW 2, 474). His argument for procreation disregards the negative value of the inevitable sufferings undergone by one's offspring (and their offspring): the good in procreating is that it has the potential ultimately to produce an individual in whom salvation – negation of the will – occurs. This possible outcome has such value that it is bought at the expense of the suffering of generations of individuals. Moreover, that they suffer greatly, or take on “the suffering of the whole world” (WWR 2, 654/SW 3, 734), is necessary to the achievement of salvation. Schopenhauer mentions no other means. Hence, the compassionate argument against procreation is not decisive: the fact that one's offspring will suffer is overridden by the value of salvation's one day being attained. So there are two reasons why Schopenhauer cannot be committed to proposition (2) “There is a moral duty not to bring human individuals into existence”. First, there cannot be a general moral duty not to procreate; second, while compassion would ideally give us reason not to procreate, that reason is overridden by the potential for

²⁰For instances in the secondary literature, see Hassan, *Nietzsche's Struggle*, 253. Hassan does not dispute that Schopenhauer holds a hedonic evaluative standard, but argues that it may be a consequence of his pessimism rather than (as with other nineteenth-century pessimists) a ground for it.

salvation in one's eventual offspring. If being an anti-natalist requires acceptance of (2), Schopenhauer is not an anti-natalist.

With regard to (1) "Never-existing is preferable to coming into existence as a human individual", there is plenty of evidence of Schopenhauer's stating just that. He clearly argues that pain or suffering predominates in life and that never-existing would have been preferable for that reason. But, as we have seen, he also regards suffering as instrumentally valuable in its capacity to induce negation of the will, which he states to be the sole candidate for the title 'highest good'. The question then is: What is the final, non-instrumental value of negation of the will? If we hold fixed the customary assumption that Schopenhauer values things only hedonically, then the value of negation of the will must be that in the state of will-lessness one is free of suffering. The highest good in that case is really the absence of suffering. But this good can arguably be best attained (as it is for Benatar) by never-existing. That would favour our reading (A) of Schopenhauer's *summum bonum* passage: negation of the will is the way to attain the highest good for those of us unfortunate enough to exist in the first place; never-existing would have been better but is now out of reach. But what if Schopenhauer considers negation of the will to life to have not the value merely of suffering's being absent, but a different, *non-hedonic* value that resides in *undergoing a transformative cognitive apprehension* of the fundamental truth about existence? If (as with our reading (B)) *this* is the highest good of all, then never-existing makes the occurrence of the highest good impossible, and Schopenhauer thinks it is better to come into existence, suffer greatly, and undergo the profound change in one's cognitive apprehension of the world that transforms one into a will-less subject.

On reading (A), proposition (1) is a truth for Schopenhauer, and he is to that extent an anti-natalist. Reading (A) is supported by many direct statements by Schopenhauer, which we sampled in Section 2 above. On reading (B), proposition (1) is also a truth, but what matters to Schopenhauer more than its *being* true is our *full realization* of its truth, a realization that frees us from the will. Recall that "the goal of our existence" is recognition of "the most important of all truths", "that we would have been better off not existing" (WWR 2, 620–1/SW 3, 695). Once again the fact that on being brought into existence one must suffer is overridden by the non-hedonic value of realizing the truth. We noted the parallel Schopenhauer draws with the Christian notion of redemption, to which human existence and suffering are necessary. Similarly, only a human being who is brought into existence by procreation, who suffers, and undergoes a fundamental transformation through suffering can attain the highest good of redemption. So on reading (B) too Schopenhauer is still an anti-natalist by virtue of holding proposition (1). But the *highest good* is not never-existing,

rather it is the transformation that occurs through realizing the truth of anti-natalism.²¹

It is misleading to call Schopenhauer an anti-natalist without any further qualification. He certainly holds the never-existing would have been preferable to existing as a human individual. But he may think that best of all is to come into existence, suffer, and reach redemptive knowledge of that truth. More importantly, for Schopenhauer there is no imperative to avoid procreation, and even the moral reasons for avoiding it are not decisive – they can be overridden by the instrumental value of producing new suffering individuals who pave the way for the highest good of the will's self-negation. We may perhaps conclude that Schopenhauer sets out to offer competing accounts of the value of existence, suffering, and procreation without offering any decisive adjudication between them. We can see him as writing perspectively, presenting both an anti-natalist point of view centred on the badness of suffering and a point of view from which there are potential overriding values that not reproducing would diminish. Bracketing off Schopenhauer's metaphysical concerns brings the former into relief. But for Schopenhauer, who is out to satisfy our alleged "metaphysical need",²² metaphysics provides a higher standpoint that must prevail.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to David Bather Woods, Mor Segev, and a referee for this journal for comments on earlier drafts, and to the following for comments at presentations of the material: Luís Aguiar da Silva, Tim Birtles, George Flecknor-Stewart, Alex Gregory, Dominic Kearney, Matthias Koßler, Colin Marshall, Brian McElwee, Sean T. Murphy, Steven Puryear, Aaron Ridley, Andrew Stephenson, Caecilie Varslev-Pedersen, Lee Walters, and Neil Williams.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Christopher Janaway  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9600-8837>

²¹Reading (B) is vulnerable to Benatar's asymmetry argument, according to which it is not bad if *whatever is thought good* fails to occur by virtue of someone's never-existing. Thus, if reaching Schopenhauerian redemption is good, it is not bad if it is never reached because no one comes into existence. Engaging with the asymmetry argument is beyond the scope of this paper.

²²See WWR 2, 169–97/SW 3: 175–209.

Bibliography

Works by Schopenhauer

(OBM) Schopenhauer, Arthur. “*On the Basis of Morals*”. In *The Two Fundamental Problems of Ethics*, translated and edited by Christopher Janaway, 113–258. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

(PP 2) Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Parerga and Paralipomena*. Translated and edited by Adrian del Caro and Christopher Janaway. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

(SW) Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Sämtliche Werke*. 7 vols. Edited by Arthur Hübscher. Mannheim: F.A. Brockhaus, 1988.

(WWR 1) Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated and edited by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

(WWR 2) Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. Translated and edited by Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway. Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018.

Other works

Anscombe, G. E. M. “Modern Moral Philosophy”. *Philosophy* 33 (1958): 1–19. doi:[10.1017/S0031819100037943](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0031819100037943).

Atwell, John E. *Schopenhauer on the Character of the World: The Metaphysics of Will*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Bather Woods, David. “The Standard Interpretation of Schopenhauer’s Compensation Argument: A Nonstandard Variant”. *European Journal of Philosophy* 27/5 (2022): 961–76. doi:[10.1111/ejop.12699](https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12699).

Bather Woods, David. “Schopenhauer’s Sexual Ethics”. In *Schopenhauer’s Moral Theory*, edited by Patrick Hassan, 160–72. London: Routledge, 2022.

Benatar, David. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Brown, Faith L. “Anti-natalism”. In *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science*, edited by Todd K. Shackelford, and Viviana A. Weekes-Shackelford, 41, 319–21. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2021.

Cholbi, Michael. “Schopenhauer, Suicide, and Contemporary Pessimism”. In *Schopenhauer’s Moral Theory*, edited by Patrick Hassan, 141–59. London: Routledge, 2022.

Hallich, Oliver. “David Benatar’s Argument from Asymmetry: A Qualified Defence”. In *Would It Be Better if We Had Never Existed? David Benatar’s Anti-Natalism*, edited by Oliver Hallich and Michael Hauskeller. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 56 (2022): 5–19.

Hallich, Oliver, and Michael Hauskeller. “Introduction”. In *Would It Be Better if We Had Never Existed? David Benatar’s Anti-Natalism*, edited by Oliver Hallich and Michael Hauskeller. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 56 (2022): 1–4. doi:[10.1007/s10790-022-09882-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-022-09882-w).

Hardy, Robert Spence. *A Manual of Buddhism, in its Modern Development*. London: Partridge and Oakey, 1853.

Hassan, Patrick. *Nietzsche’s Struggle Against Pessimism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

Hauskeller, Michael. “Anti-Natalism, Pollyannaism, and Asymmetry: A Defence of Cheery Optimism”. In *Would It Be Better if We Had Never Existed? David Benatar’s*

Anti-Natalism, edited by Oliver Hallich and Michael Hauskeller. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 56 (2022): 21–35.

Janaway, Christopher. “Schopenhauer’s Consoling View of Death”. In Christopher Janaway, *Essays on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche: Values and the Will of Life*, 116–29. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Janaway, Christopher. “What’s So Good about Negation of the Will? Schopenhauer and the Problem of the *Summum Bonum*”. In Christopher Janaway, *Essays on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche: Values and the Will of Life*, 73–97. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Langone, Laura. *Schopenhauer’s Buddhism: A Historical – Philosophical Inquiry*. London: Bloomsbury, 2024.

Lougheed, Kirk. “Anti-Natalism”. *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ISSN 2161-0002. <https://iep.utm.edu/anti-natalism/>, accessed 29/04/2025.

Magnusson, Erik. “On Risk-Based Arguments for Anti-natalism”. In *Would It Be Better if We Had Never Existed? David Benatar’s Anti-Natalism*, edited by Oliver Hallich and Michael Hauskeller. *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 56 (2022): 101–17. doi:[10.1007/s10790-022-09889-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10790-022-09889-3).

Metz, Thaddeus. *Contemporary Anti-Natalism*. London: Routledge, 2023.

Morioka, Masahiro. “What Is Antinatalism? Definition, History, and Categories”. *The Review of Life Studies* 12 (2021): 1–39.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy*. Translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Plümacher, Olga. *Der Pessimismus in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart: Geschichtliches und Kritisches*. Heidelberg: Georg Weiss, 1888.

Puryear, Stephen. “Schopenhauer’s Rejection of the Moral Ought”. In *Schopenhauer’s Moral Theory*, edited by Patrick Hassan, 12–30. London: Routledge, 2022.

Segev, Mor. “Schopenhauer on the Inconsistency Between Optimism and Personal Immortality”. *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 62 (2024): 453–68. doi:[10.1111/sjp.12563](https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12563).

Simmons, Byron. “A Thousand Pleasures are Not Worth a Single Pain: The Compensation Argument for Schopenhauer’s Pessimism”. *European Journal of Philosophy* 29 (2021): 120–36. doi:[10.1111/ejop.12561](https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12561).

Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*. Translated by Robert Fagles. London: Penguin, 1984.