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Can we Reconcile Axiological Nihilism and Pessimism? A Response to Prescott and Benatar on the Nature of Pessimism

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It is commonly assumed that indifferentism, which includes axiological nihilism, is incompatible with pessimism because of the perceived conflict between a lack of objective value and a claim of objectively poor quality of existence. In this paper I will examine Benatar and Prescott's views on what characterizes pessimism, as well as Benatar's arguments for the badness of death, and attempt to apply similar arguments to life to find a way to argue that even though nothing is objective bad, the quality of our existences are still generally poor. I offer several non-objective pessimist arguments, including that indifferentism can be itself a source of badness in our lives.

Key Words: Pessimism, Axiological Nihilism, Nihilism, Benatar, Prescott.

There seems to be an unbreachable divide between the philosophical positions of indifferentism and pessimism, largely because of the nihilistic stance of indifferentism on value. Benatar argues that we can say that death is bad for a person without saying that it is objectively bad, and I believe that an argument of a similar form may make it possible to reach a position of pessimism while holding axiological nihilism. In this paper I will examine Benatar's views on the badness of death and Prescott on the nature of a pessimistic stance, especially in relation to nihilism, and then explore if Benatar's argument could help bridge the gap between axiological nihilism and pessimism. I will then present arguments for my particular brand of pessimism that relies on subjective

harms and bads rather, including the argument that indifferentism can be a reason for pessimism.

Prescott in his paper *What Pessimism Is* explains his view on what characterizes philosophical pessimism. Specifically, he looks at pessimism as a stance. By this, Prescott means that pessimism is more than a doctrine, or a collection of propositions, it also includes attitudes, commitments, and approaches to life. This stance is marked out by the belief that the bad prevails over the good ¹. Prescott also discusses a few positions that are often conflated or confused with pessimism, specifically, fatalism, cynicism, skepticism, nihilism, affirmation of decline, and despair ². Most of these are not relevant to the topic at hand, but Prescott's explanation of the distinction between pessimism and nihilism is very important. Prescott says that all of these other positions are related to pessimism and some are components of it, nihilism however, specifically axiological nihilism, is incompatible with pessimism. Axiological nihilism is the position that there is nothing of objective value. He argues that if nothing has objective value, then nothing can be objectively good or bad, and thus no judgement about the quality of life is true ³. Intuitively this works, if there is no true good or bad, then how could the bad prevail over the good? It is usually seen as a defeater for the compatibility of axiological nihilism and pessimism.

As mentioned above, indifferentism is related to axiological nihilism. Indifferentism is the position that the universe at large is indifferent to humans or our desires, essentially based on a recognition of the universe's scale relative to ours both spatially and temporally, lack of objective value, and our overall relative insignificance. This position also necessitates an acceptance of axiological nihilism, the indifference of existence and our own lack of significance at least partially being because of a lack of objective value.

On the side of pessimism is philosopher David Benatar. In his book *The Human Predicament* and other papers, Benatar discusses at length his philosophical arguments for pessimism, leading to a conclusion that the quality of life is overall poor. Having

¹ Paul Prescott, "What Pessimism Is." In *Journal of Philosophical Research*, 2012, 2.

² Prescott., 2.

³ Prescott., 11-12.

concluded this, Benatar then needs to explain why death is not a preferable option, otherwise life would not be a predicament, merely an easily, if costly, escapable problem. Benatar's position is that death can be bad for the person that dies, arguing against someone who takes an Epicurean position on death, that death cannot be bad for the person who dies because they cannot experience being dead. According to Epicurus the perceived badness of death is based entirely on a fear or apprehension of death, which will go away when we realize that death is not bad for us⁴. Benatar gives two main reasons that death can be bad; it deprives us of possible future goods and it annihilates us⁵.

The deprivation theory states that death is bad for us because it deprives us of possible future goods that would have been occurred if we had not died. Intuitively this sounds pretty convincing. If we think about a death early in life, say from a car accident, it seems very intuitive that there were many future goods that would have been experienced by the person if they had not died at that point⁶. A problem arises if one were to take a deterministic view of the world however. Given determinism, the death could not have occurred at a different point in time, and hence any theoretical future goods would only be imagined. This opens it up to an Epicurean argument, which since any loss of potential experience is only perceived, removing that perception will remove the harm. For the non-determinists though this can still be a convincing argument.

Annihilation, Benatar says, is bad because of the deprivation, but also because it thwarts our desire to continue existing. Additionally, annihilation is a destruction of the self and a cessation of conscious experience, and as long as these are valued by someone, their destruction will be bad, and instinctually, or "pre-rationally"⁷ as Benatar says, we wish to avoid our annihilation⁸. Although not included in this section, Benatar also mentions that annihilation adds to the general meaninglessness of life as it makes our existence much more temporally restricted and relatively insignificant⁹. According to

⁴ Epicurus. "Letter to Menoeceus" In *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testemonia*, 1994, 1-2.

⁵ Benatar., "The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions.", 2017101-103.

⁶ Benatar., 2017, 102.

⁷ Benatar., 2017, 105.

⁸ Benatar., 2017, 102-110.

⁹ Benatar., 2017, 94.

Benatar, the period over which death is bad for us is while we are dead, and this will always be incredibly longer than the time one was alive, potentially an infinite span of time ¹⁰.

I believe that a third possible argument can be inferred from these, though Benatar does not directly state it. It is based on both accounts he gives, in addition to death thwarting our desire to continue existing, it can thwart any number of other goals or desires of ours. In many, if not most deaths, there are at least some things that the person would have liked to do if they had survived. This could be the completion of a project, having a certain experience, or simply a desire to spend more time with loved ones. This is something of a deprivation account but it also solves the deterministic objection. Since these desires are not necessarily things that would have occurred, it is simply the interference with the completion of our goal that is the harm. If we think that accomplishing a goal is good for us and that failing a goal or being prevented from accomplishing it is bad for us, then death can most certainly be considered a harm.

Although some may disagree, I believe that Benatar gives some convincing reasons to think that death can in fact be bad for a person, despite a lack of objective value. If he can argue this about death, then perhaps it is possible to argue the same thing about life. In other works, Benatar argues that life has more bad in it than good, however this relies on him talking about things that he considers intrinsically and objectively good or bad, such as pleasure and pain. If however we reject such objective evaluations, then many of his arguments for the badness of life cease to function. However, Benatar's arguments for the badness of death are framed as harms to the individual and do still work if we talk about them as subjectively bad rather than objectively bad. My project here is to apply a similar type of argument that Benatar uses for death to life. An important note about this type of argument is that they do not necessarily imply that the quality of all lives are poor, simply that either most lives are bad, or have sufficient reason to be considered bad. Similarly, Benatar's arguments about death have exceptions, he acknowledges that in some cases "it is less bad to die than to continue living." ¹¹. Similarly, there will be some cases in which my arguments

¹⁰ Benatar., 2017, 116.

¹¹ Benatar., 2017, 104.

do not apply, where a particular person's circumstances make that part of their existence not bad for them.

So now the goal is to investigate if there are any aspects of life or existence as a whole that make it bad for people, without being objectively bad. Essentially, these attributes will need to be things that are antithetical or opposed to certain outcomes desired by or beneficial for humans. The most immediate reason would have to do with the implications of axiological nihilism itself. In living in our world, we make value judgments and assign personal meaning and attachments to things. We do this constantly and out of necessity, as humans we are compelled to value things and people that occupy the world around us. Examples range from political or ethical views to things like friendship or other forms of human relationships to something as simple as taste in music or food. We both manufacture and deeply desire meaning or purpose in life, but invariably whatever we place this value in is externally meaningless as none of it has true value. Even worse, we as beings capable of such reflection can become aware of this. This recognition can be a source of harm and great despair to us as it shows us that we can never be in contact with anything that objectively matters, as it does not exist, and everything that matters to us is truly meaningless and devoid of true value. That which we desire so strongly is impossible and out of reach.

Another option is in relation to how our death thwarts plans and goals, as discussed above. While this argument itself is more about the badness of death than the badness of life, if we look at it in terms of lifespan it does become a good candidate. While we do have much greater lifespans than most lifeforms on Earth, our lives are minuscule in comparison to the scale of the universe, or even what we imagine they could be. Many science fiction and fantasy properties show extreme longevity as superhuman or desirable. Examples include the more than 160 year lifespan of far future humans in Futurama, the hobbits, dwarves, and elves in Lord of the Rings, and the time lords of Doctor Who. Our relatively short lives are not only not preferable to us, but also they significantly limit the number of projects and goals we can fulfil in the time we have. If we take accomplishing a goal to be something good and failing to do so a bad, then it is bad for us that our limited lifespans.

Even worse, the universe in which we live may itself be considered a negative aspect of existence. The vast majority of the universe is absolutely antithetical to human life, completely and often instantly lethal to us. Even large portions of our own planet, which many people like to think of as our comfortable and safe home, are deadly, from deep oceans, to high altitudes, to extremes of temperature. At risk of anthropomorphizing, the universe may even be said to be hostile to human life, and indeed all known life. Evolutionary pressures constantly weed out the unlucky, forcing us to actively work against the forces of nature to stay alive in an unending battle.

In addition to the objective valuelessness of everything we hold dear, it is all temporally limited and will eventually die or be destroyed. While much of this may not affect us directly because many things we value can outlast our own existence, it is also a recognition of this that is painful for us. A common theme for pessimist philosophers is the negative aspects of consciousness. The existence of consciousness in humans opens us up to a lot of the badness of life, especially since it allows us to recognize a lot of badness that would be beyond our knowledge or experience without consciousness, from a recognition of our mortality or the temporal limitation of things that we value, to things like regrets, dilemmas, and anxieties. Debatably one of the most terrible effects of consciousness is the ability to feel existential pains. While these are by no means the only downside of consciousness, they are perhaps the most philosophically relevant and personally interesting. The very fact that we will someday die seems bad for us. If Benatar is right about the badness of death, then its very existence is bad for us, not to mention the apprehension and dread that it elicits in us.

One final argument I will present is that our intelligence which gives us the ability to conceptualize counterfactuals, to imagine the world not as it is. Because of this, we are able to conceive of ways in which our lives could be better, but in many cases no power to bring this about. One might imagine a life of significantly less pain and misfortune, or even simple conveniences, however these are beyond our control.

These examples are by no means exhaustive of possible pessimistic arguments that can be made to work with axiological nihilism. All that need be present for such an argument is an aspect of existence that is bad for humans, or it is opposed in some way to that which is desirable to humans. The bad for humans prevails over the good for

humans. This theoretically should be possible with most common pessimistic arguments as it is just a different source of the negative value. So then this brand of pessimism is in relation to us, rather than being about objective goods and bads. This type of framework can of course be applied from the viewpoint of anything, dogs, insects, granite pebbles, but since we experience the world as humans, what matters in terms of our interests is what is relevant to us.

As alluded to earlier, I agree with various pessimist philosophers, including Benatar, who point to consciousness as a major source of the badness of human existence. A complete discussion of consciousness in relation to pessimism is beyond the scope of this paper, however I will discuss one relevant point. Humans are often picked out from other supposed conscious beings by describing us as “reflectively conscious”, generally referring to the philosophical or otherwise ability of humans to reflect on the quality of our life, enabled by consciousness and our uniquely powerful intelligence. This reflective consciousness allows us to experience second order bads based on the bads we already experience by giving us the ability to recognize them as bads and realize the horrible sum of them that we may experience. In this way it can be argued that consciousness is truly the “parent of all horrors”¹². As pessimist and cosmic horror author Thomas Ligotti puts it, giving us a possible explanation for why human existence is so bad if objectively nothing is. In fact, our reflective abilities, as well as our ability to conceptualize counterfactuals can exacerbate many of the previously mentioned problems.

Overall, I believe that I have given a satisfying account of how we can reach pessimism from a position of axiological nihilism. It is not the same type of pessimism as others such as Benatar and Prescott accept, but it is very much in the same spirit, and I believe it is more defensible, not being one to accept the concept of objective value. It makes it possible for us to hold that the universe is ambivalent and indifferent to our problems, triumphs, and very existence, while still holding that the quality of human life is overall poor. While by no means a cheerful thought, it does seem at least plausible that this could represent the actual state of reality.

¹² Thomas Ligotti, “Conspiracy Against the Human Race.”, 2010, xix.

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