

# Why would very bad lives be worth continuing?

---

**Sušnik, Matej**

*Source / Izvornik:* **South African Journal of Philosophy, 2020, 39, 285 - 295**

**Journal article, Published version**

**Rad u časopisu, Objavljena verzija rada (izdavačev PDF)**

<https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2020.1809122>

*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://um.nsk.hr/um:nbn:hr:261:582128>

*Rights / Prava:* [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2025-01-31**



*Repository / Repozitorij:*

[Repository of the Institute of Philosophy](#)



South African



# South African Journal of Philosophy

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsph20>

## Why would very bad lives be worth continuing?

Matej Sušnik

To cite this article: Matej Sušnik (2020) Why would very bad lives be worth continuing?, South African Journal of Philosophy, 39:3, 285-295, DOI: [10.1080/02580136.2020.1809122](https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2020.1809122)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02580136.2020.1809122>



Published online: 25 Sep 2020.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## Why would very bad lives be worth continuing?

**Matej Sušnik**

Institute of Philosophy, Zagreb, Croatia  
[matej@ifzg.hr](mailto:matej@ifzg.hr)

David Benatar believes that (1) all human lives are very bad; that (2) some human lives are worth continuing; and that (3) some human lives are not worth continuing. This article claims that Benatar's arguments do not support all three statements at once. After giving a brief outline of his position, it is shown that insofar as his arguments support (1) and (2), they do not support (3), and that insofar as they support (1) and (3), they do not support (2). It is then shown that insofar as they support (2) and (3), they do not support (1).

### Introduction

David Benatar (2006; 2017) believes that all human lives are very bad. While he notes that “the overwhelming majority claims to be either ‘pretty happy’ or ‘very happy’” (2006, 66), and that “billions of people judge the quality of their own lives to be good” (2017, 67), he is not impressed by these reports and offers interesting arguments why people's judgments about the quality of their own lives are not to be trusted. People think that their lives are good, he argues, not because their lives are indeed good, but because their assessment of life's quality is affected by various naturally selected tendencies toward self-deception. It is only because people wear rose-colored glasses, he suggests, that they cannot see that the quality of their lives is actually “quite appalling” (2017, 66). In this article, I challenge Benatar's argument and reveal a tension that I believe exists in his view.

### Setting the stage

In *Better Never to Have Been* (2006), Benatar develops two arguments that coming into existence is a harm. The first one is based on the asymmetry between positive and negative values, and the second one relies on the poor quality of human life. While the conclusion of the asymmetry argument is that “coming into existence is *always* a harm”, the argument from life's quality reveals the “magnitude” of that harm (2006, 61; emphasis in original), but it also shows that – due to the huge amount of suffering in the world – procreation is not morally permissible because it exposes human beings to the notable risk of being seriously harmed (see Benatar 2006). I will focus only on the argument from life's quality.

Benatar thinks that coming into existence is a great harm because the quality of human life is very bad. While he does not think that “all lives are equally bad”, he does think that “even the best lives are very bad...” (2006, 61). He says that

...the quality of human life is not only much worse than most people think but actually quite awful. This may not be true in every minute or even hour of (human) life – there are moments of relief and pleasure – but taken as a whole, it is an unenviable condition (Benatar 2017, 91).

Benatar puts great effort into supporting this claim and I will discuss his arguments later in more detail. But the basic idea is roughly this: taking into account all the suffering, misery and horrors that pervade human existence, it is reasonable to think that the bad things in our lives outweigh the good ones. And once the quality of human lives is properly assessed, one realises that there is really no objective ground to believe that our lives are good (see 2006; 2017).

This view is supported by two observations. First, Benatar points out that people often have mistaken judgments about the actual quality of their own lives, and that any good theory of life's

quality should be able to accommodate that fact. More importantly, he offers strong empirical evidence that people's perception of life's quality is not reliable and that most people perceive their own lives as being much better than they really are (Benatar 2006). Second, Benatar is perfectly aware that his negative evaluation of the human condition goes against the dominant view which says that most human lives contain more good than bad things and are therefore worth living. His answer is that no human lives are worth living in the sense of worth starting, but if one was unfortunate enough to have been brought into existence, then, at least for some people, it might be worth sticking around for a while (Benatar 2006). At least some people may have lives worth living, he says, in the sense of worth continuing. However, even if some human lives are worth continuing, this does not alter the fact that all human lives are very bad.

To set the stage for my discussion, consider the following three statements:

- (1) All human lives are very bad.
- (2) Some human lives are worth continuing.
- (3) Some human lives are not worth continuing.

Some people may think that good lives are those worth continuing, and that bad lives are those not worth continuing. And if all human lives are very bad, then it might seem that no human life is worth continuing. But Benatar accepts all three statements. As it will soon become clear, statements (2) and (3) can be attributed to him because he thinks that there is a threshold for lives worth continuing. Moreover, he agrees that "a life can be so bad that ceasing to exist is preferable" (Benatar 2006, 22).

It is important to emphasise that these three statements could be examined independently of the following statement, which is also defended by Benatar:

- (4) No human life is worth starting.

My concern here will not be with (4), but rather with the relation between (1), (2) and (3). For example, one may agree that there is no tension between (2), (3) and (4) and accept Benatar's explanation that the criteria for determining whether a life is worth starting and whether a life is worth continuing are not the same (see Benatar 2006). Nonetheless, one could still insist that – as long as one focuses on Benatar's arguments – such a tension exists between (1), (2) and (3).<sup>1</sup>

A few preliminary remarks. The quality of human life is, according to Benatar, an entirely objective matter. While he does not deny that one's life may be affected by one's subjective perspective, he also does not accept a purely subjectivist account of life's quality. Such an account, he believes, cannot accommodate the fact that people can be mistaken about the actual quality of their lives: one may feel that one's life is going well even if it is actually not (see Benatar 2017). It is difficult not to agree with him here. The amount of bad things in a person's life might be so immense that it is not easy to see how one's perception in that case could make any important difference. It is reasonable to assume that one's perception of life's quality is actually determined by the objective circumstances, and if the objective circumstances in one's life are objectively below some acceptable standard, it may be unclear how one's perceiving one's life to be good could really make it good.

That being said, Benatar also thinks that there is an objectively determined threshold above which lives are worth continuing and below which lives are not worth continuing. As he points out in his discussion on suicide:

If, when judged in the right way, the quality of a life is (or will soon fall) *below the level that makes it worth continuing*, then, all things being equal, suicide is not inappropriate. By contrast, if the quality of life is *above that level*, then, all things being equal, suicide is inappropriate (Benatar 2017, 183; emphasis added).

1 It should be noted that when Benatar says that a human life is "very bad", that does not mean that a human life is not "worth starting". For, according to him, no human life is worth starting *because* all human lives are very bad (see Benatar 2006). As it will be argued later, it is precisely because the term "very bad" in Benatar's account lacks the exact meaning that one may raise doubts about his negative assessment of the quality of human life.

But if the quality of *all* human lives is very bad, one may wonder, why are they nevertheless divided into those that are worth continuing and those that are not? Why is there a threshold at all? Granted, even if all human lives were very bad, that would not yet mean that their quality must be the same and that some human lives could not be better than others. But notice that this could be true even if there was no threshold. In other words, Benatar could simply maintain that all human lives are very bad and that some human lives are better than others, and still argue that *no* human life is worth continuing.

But he rejects that view and accepts all three statements. In this article, I show that the arguments Benatar develops do not support (1), (2) and (3) all at once. The following section shows that insofar as his arguments support (1) and (2), they do not support (3), and that insofar as they support (1) and (3), they do not support (2). The last section shows that insofar as they support (2) and (3), they do not support (1).

### Very bad – but worth continuing?

The assessment of life's quality ultimately depends on which theory of well-being is true. While some people may think that a good life is the one which contains more pleasure than pain, or the one in which one fulfills most of one's desires, others could believe that there are some objectively valuable things that a life must contain in order to be good (see Parfit 1984). Benatar argues that – no matter which of these theories is true – human lives turn out to be very bad.

Here is his argument in brief. When we consider human lives from a human point of view, we see that there are better and worse lives, and that some lives are, whereas others are not, worth continuing. That much is clear. However, adopting the human perspective, Benatar thinks, will not get us very far because “knowing how well a particular life goes in comparison with other lives tells us very little about the baseline – how good human life is” (2006, 82). Hence, if we wanted to assess the quality of human life “from a truly objective perspective” (2006, 81), he says, we should move beyond human standards and take the “point of view of the universe”. And considering human lives from that point of view, we get a different picture: we come to realise how poor all human lives actually are.

Benatar sees “no reason why we should not judge the quality of life by the highest (logically) possible standard” (2012, 150). And indeed, once we set a perfect life (and a perfect life does not need to be a human life) as a standard in relation to which the quality of human lives is evaluated, the thesis that *all* human lives are very bad gains more plausibility. For instance, it is easy enough to imagine beings who do not experience various unpleasant states such as “hunger, thirst, bowel and bladder distension... tiredness, stress, thermal discomfort (that is, feeling either too hot or too cold), and itch” (Benatar 2006, 71); beings whose desires are fulfilled immediately after they are formed; and beings who live much longer than we do, and whose lives contain much more knowledge, understanding, wisdom; and whose moral and aesthetic capacities far exceed those of ordinary people (see Benatar 2006; 2017).

Although one may agree that all these things are relevant for evaluating the quality of human life, it might still seem that the stronger case needs to be made in order to support the view that all human lives are very bad. Benatar seems to be well aware of this. This is why his list of life's negative features is quite extensive and, in addition to those already mentioned, also includes different frustrations, chronic pain and illness, various forms of human evil, and death. When one considers things from that perspective and takes all this into account, Benatar suggests, one sees that there are so many different ways in which our lives could be better that it is no longer convincing to assert that human life is good. More precisely, we see that all human lives are “noncomparatively or objectively” very bad (2017, 67).<sup>2</sup>

2 At this point one could wonder whether human lives could always be judged by “the highest (logically) possible standard”. While it is easier to think that such standard exists with respect to some objective goods that are constitutive of a good life – as when the amount of knowledge is judged by reference to omniscience – it is not at all clear that the same is true in the case of other objective goods such as wisdom, moral goodness or aesthetic capacities. It might seem that there is no limit to how much of these goods one may possibly acquire: no matter how wise, virtuous and aesthetically sensitive one is, one can always be wiser, more virtuous and display more aesthetic refinement (see Plantinga 1974). But even if there is no such standard, Benatar would presumably respond, that still does not mean that

Let us now grant, for the sake of argument, that the quality of all human lives is indeed “quite awful”. If so, one may ask, how could it be that some of those awful lives are nevertheless worth continuing?<sup>3</sup> But there is no inconsistency here. Suppose that one agrees with Benatar that death is one of those negative factors that make a human life very bad.<sup>4</sup> Since death is both inevitable and bad for the person who dies, we might think, it significantly decreases the overall quality of all human lives. But that surely does not mean that one’s life could not be worth living – in the sense of worth continuing – until the moment one’s death actually arrives. A similar point, for example, can be made about human life span. Suppose one agrees that human lives are very bad because human life span is short and that “a life of a thousand years (in full vigour) would be much better than a life of eighty or ninety years” (2017, 81). Even in that case, it would not follow that a life of eighty or ninety years could not be worth continuing. Therefore, there is no incompatibility between (1) and (2).

Still, while (1) and (2) can both be shown to be true, the problem is that this way of defending the compatibility of these two claims does not come without a cost. Let us return to the case of death and its effect on life’s quality. As noted, while death makes human lives very bad, it does not follow that a human life could not be worth continuing.

Notice, however, that this is actually true of *all* human lives: the inevitability of death does not make *any* human life *not* worth continuing. Even if death negatively affects life’s quality, it is nevertheless completely irrelevant for the question whether a person’s life could become so bad that it could be better for that person not to continue living it. The same applies to a short human life span. Certainly, even if human lives are very bad because they last only eighty or ninety years, that does not show that they could not be worth continuing. But a short human life span does not make *any* human life – however short – not worth continuing. In sum, the consequence of appealing to the inevitability of death and a short human life span in order to establish that (1) and (2) are perfectly consistent is that there is no longer a way of distinguishing between those lives that are and those that are not worth continuing.

Since Benatar in fact believes that some human lives are not worth continuing, this reveals a potential difficulty for his view. Invoking these examples establishes that (1) and (2) are compatible only under the assumption that the objective threshold for lives worth continuing is already fixed. While these examples support (1) and (2), they also raise doubts about the plausibility of (3).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the quality of human life is not determined exclusively by longevity and death. They merely contribute to its overall badness. As already mentioned, there are many other factors that seem to affect not only life’s quality but the threshold as well. A life of a person with a terminal condition, for example, could not only be very bad, but not worth continuing as well. But focusing on these other factors, I now want to suggest, opens up another difficulty. While Benatar could easily establish the truth of (1) and (3), his arguments now fail to support (2).

It is important to keep in mind that, according to Benatar, the standard against which human lives are being evaluated is actually very high. And how bad human lives are, he argues, immediately becomes apparent as soon as one realises how distant they are from the ideal standard. However, considering how far human lives are from perfection, it would seem that the threshold for lives

---

human lives could not be better in many of these respects. For example, even if there is no highest degree of moral goodness, that still does not mean that it would not be better to have more moral goodness than we currently have. However, in the absence of a standard against which this issue can be assessed, such judgments will not have objective ground and will merely be comparative. Under the assumption that there is no highest possible amount of moral goodness, it could always be objected that the amount of goodness one currently has is not enough and that the quality of one’s life would be much higher if it contained more of it. But, contrary to Benatar’s suggestion about how lives ought to be evaluated, such judgments would then not tell us anything about how good human life is in the noncomparative sense.

3 David DeGrazia, for example, notes that (1) and (2), when taken together, may raise some eyebrows. He writes: “One must admit that this conjunction of claims – that human lives are terrible yet usually worth continuing – is very odd on its face. But Benatar endeavors to explain how this and related odd-sounding claims can be true” (DeGrazia 2010, 324).

4 Death is bad, according to Benatar, not only because it deprives the individual of life’s goods, but also because “it annihilates the being who dies” (2017, 102).

5 It should be noted that Benatar at some point says that “[w]e consider longevity to be a good thing (*at least if the life is above a minimum quality threshold*)” (2017, 81; emphasis added). Therefore, he is well aware that the threshold is set independently of some factors that do affect life’s quality, but – contrary to what is being argued here – he obviously does not see that as a problem for his overall position.

worth continuing should be set even higher than Benatar thinks, so that no human life is worth continuing.<sup>6</sup>

This requires explanation. Benatar argues that life's quality cannot be evaluated "from a truly objective perspective" unless one moves away from a human perspective and considers human life *sub specie aeternitatis*. But whether one's life is worth continuing also depends on its quality. And this suggests that the place of the threshold for lives worth continuing should also be determined *sub specie aeternitatis*.

In that regard, one may reasonably wonder – given how awful human lives are from that perspective – why the threshold is actually set so low. The fact that Benatar believes it is set so low provides us with a reason to think that he does not adopt the point of view of the universe at all, but instead sets the threshold from a human perspective.<sup>7</sup>

This point can be clarified in another way. Benatar is very careful to distinguish between how somebody thinks his life is going and how his life is actually going, or, in his words, between "the *actual* and *perceived* quality of a life" (Benatar 2017, 185; emphasis in original). And his controversial claim that all human lives are very bad is the claim about life's actual quality, not its perceived quality. But there is no reason why this distinction cannot be extended further so that it also applies to the notion of a life worth continuing. Thus, it seems perfectly consistent to distinguish between somebody thinking his life is worth continuing and his life actually being worth continuing. Armed with this distinction, one can then insist that Benatar does not rule out the possibility that most people merely think that their lives are worth continuing but that no human life is *actually* worth continuing.

By way of illustration, let us assume that the only relevant factor that should be taken into account when evaluating life's quality is the amount of knowledge an individual acquires during the course of a lifetime. At one point Benatar says, "[t]he sad truth, however, is that on the spectrum from no knowledge and understanding to omniscience, even the cleverest, best-educated humans are much closer to the unfortunate end of the spectrum" (2017, 81). Since the difference in life's quality between the best- and the least-educated people is insignificantly small when compared to the difference in life's quality between the best-educated person and some omniscient being, let us agree that the quality of all human lives in this example is *actually* awful.

That being said, why think that some of these awful lives are *actually* worth continuing? Assuming that life's quality exclusively depends on the amount of knowledge one acquires and taking into account how distant *all* humans are from omniscience, one might think that – *insofar as these lives are considered from the point of view of the universe* – none of them are worth continuing. Granted, how well one's life goes depends on many different aspects, not merely on the amount of knowledge one acquires. But that is beside the point. Since the claim under consideration is that all human lives are actually awful and "close to the unfortunate end of the spectrum" no matter which theory of well-being is true, it needs to be explained why some of these awful lives end up above the threshold.

Interestingly enough, one can even invoke some of Benatar's arguments to support the above reasoning. More precisely, the claim that the threshold for lives worth continuing is (and should be) much higher than Benatar thinks, it seems to me, is also supported by (a) his student analogy, and (b) his claim about people not being able to see the true quality of their own lives.

6 Several authors have pointed out that Benatar's view entails that suicide is better than continued life (see, for example, Harman 2009; McGregor and Sullivan-Bissett 2012).

7 Benatar might reply that the threshold is very low because continuing a very bad life could sometimes be in one's interest. For example, one's life – although very bad – could sometimes be better than death. Furthermore, most human beings, as Benatar emphasises, have a "life drive" (2017, 177) and usually become "invested" in their own lives (see 2006, 151). Similarly, he could point out, family members, friends and loved ones are often harmed by one's death, and this is also something that needs to be taken into account when one thinks about whether one's life is worth continuing. However, and I will discuss some of these issues later in more detail, it is difficult to deny that one's life could become so bad that it would no longer be in one's interest to continue to exist (see Benatar 2012). In that case, all of the abovementioned reasons for continuing a life would be defeated. Hence, if the threshold *ultimately* depends on the quality of life, and if the quality of life is awful "from a truly objective perspective", then it is quite possible that the threshold is – if also determined from a truly objective perspective – much higher than we think. Benatar does not rule out this possibility. I will return to this point at the end of this section.

Let us consider (a) first. Benatar says that

[t]he quality of both future and current lives could be judged by the Perfection Standard. In using that standard, however, we might think that the different conditions need to be met (a) for a life to be worth starting, and (b) for a life to be worth continuing. Thus we might say that only perfect lives are worth starting...but that even lives that fall significantly short of this standard might be worth continuing even while recognizing how far they are from perfection. Consider the following analogy. In marking a student's work, we might employ a kind of perfection standard (100%) in judging the student's work. This does not mean that we cannot use one threshold to determine a Pass and another to determine a First Class Pass (2012, 151).

One may happily agree with everything in this passage and still think that "the conditions that need to be met for a life to be worth continuing" are much stronger than he believes them to be. Notice first that Benatar is here referring to the distinction between "life worth starting" and "life worth continuing". Since my concern is with the relation between (1), (2) and (3), not the one between (2), (3) and (4), I will leave (4) aside. Or, to make the same point by using his analogy, my goal here is to examine whether there is a good answer to the following question: why do some students receive a pass for their work despite the fact that their work is very bad or even "quite awful"?

It seems safe to say that there is a general rule according to which students cannot receive a pass for their work unless they score at least 50%. Of course, it would be unreasonable to expect that Benatar tells us exactly at which point on the spectrum from the worst life to the perfect life a life receives "a pass", that is, becomes worth continuing. But we do know that, according to him, this point does not lie somewhere in the middle of the spectrum, but rather "*much closer to the unfortunate end*". Now, does that mean that it would, analogously, be appropriate for students to receive a pass for their work even if they scored significantly less than 50%? If yes, it would not be unreasonable to expect that one justifies setting such a low threshold when evaluating student work.

In a similar vein, assuming that the quality of all human lives is actually awful, why does Benatar think that some of these lives deserve "a pass"? Once again, this suggests that he does not really approach the threshold question *sub specie aeternitatis*. But it seems that he should. For it is the actual quality of one's life that determines whether one's life is worth continuing, and assessing life's actual quality, Benatar thinks, is an entirely objective matter. If the truly objective judgment about the quality of human life can be reached only from the point of view of the universe, this point of view should also be relevant when it comes to determining the threshold for lives worth continuing.

Let us turn to (b) now. At one point Benatar clarifies what is involved in taking the point of view of the universe: "[W]hat this perspective does is prevent the limited horizons and imagination of most human beings from getting in the way of reaching conclusions about what would be *good for them*" (2012, 151; emphasis added). Benatar is here appealing to people's interests. In order to determine what is really good for us (i.e. what is in our interest), it is important that we look at ourselves and others as objectively as possible. And the objective assessment of the actual quality of our lives requires that we take the external point of view and remove our various subjective human limitations and biases.

But if this is correct, then we cannot know what is in our interest before we adopt this point of view. We cannot be sure, for example, that it is in our interest to continue living before we acquire true beliefs about the actual quality of our lives. And given that people are, as Benatar shows, subject to various psychological mechanisms that prevent them from seeing the actual quality of their lives, it should come as no surprise that a person could also believe that his own life is worth continuing even if it is actually not. Arguably, people are more prone to accept this possibility when it does not apply to their own lives.<sup>8</sup> However, if the above remarks are on the right track, this may not only be a possibility, but something that is already true of all of us. In other words, it could be

8 Compare the following comment by Benatar: "Most people recognise that human lives can sometimes be of an appallingly low quality. The tendency, however, is to think that this is true of *other people's* lives, not one's own" (2017, 71; emphasis in original).



that all people – including those who lead the best lives – falsely believe that it is in their interest to continue living.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, once we take the point of view of the universe, we might as well realise not just that our lives are *actually* awful, but also that our lives are *actually* not worth continuing.

Since Benatar does not rule out the possibility that no human life is worth continuing, I conclude that insofar as his arguments support (1) and (3), they no longer support (2).

### **Worth continuing – but very bad?**

In the previous section, I have argued that insofar as Benatar’s arguments support (1) and (2), they fail to support the claim that some human lives are *not* worth continuing, and that insofar as they support (1) and (3), they fail to support the claim that some human lives *are* worth continuing. In this section, I will argue that insofar as his arguments support (2) and (3), they fail to support the thesis that all human lives are very bad.

Benatar does not agree. Even if there is a line that separates human lives into those that are and those that are not worth continuing, he maintains, they are all still very bad. He thinks of the following analogy: “Consider, for example, an evening at the cinema. A film might be bad enough that it would have been better not to have gone to see it, but not so bad that it is worth leaving before it finishes” (2006, 23, n. 15). He clearly suggests that the same point could be made about life: human lives are bad enough that it would have been better not to have started them at all, but some of them might not be that bad that they are not worth continuing.

This analogy should be approached with caution. For its purpose is to clarify the relation between (1), (2), (3) and (4), not the relation between (1), (2) and (3). Hence, I will leave aside (4) and focus on the following question: how could one establish that a movie worth continuing is also very bad?

Benatar would presumably give the following answer. To say that the movie is very bad is to say something about the movie as a whole, but this does not exclude the possibility that the movie includes some parts that are not that bad. In a similar vein, the view that the quality of all human lives is very poor is perfectly compatible with the view that some human lives are worth continuing: the former view is about one’s life *as a whole* and the latter about some specific time interval. In other words, it might be that at some period in one’s life things are not that bad as to make one’s life not worth continuing, but if one considers one’s life in its entirety, then every human life is very bad.

However, Benatar allows that the quality of a movie (or a life) depends, among other things, on how these parts are distributed (see 2006). If the only part of the movie that is not that bad takes place within its first five minutes, then one should be well advised to leave immediately after that part is over. Perhaps one might think that it would be worth staying until the end of the movie just in order to get one’s money’s worth. But that would be to commit the “sunk-cost” fallacy. This fallacy occurs when people continue with some activity just because of what they have already invested in it, and not because of its present or future value. Since one could not get the ticket money back either way, there would be no good reason to stay and watch the very bad movie until the end, especially if one preferred doing something else instead. Similarly, if the only part of the movie that is not that bad takes place within its last five minutes, then it may still be reasonable to leave the cinema before that time. Even if there is a not-that-bad part, it may not be worth staying in the cinema to see it.

Benatar would probably agree that in the above cases it would be better to leave the cinema, but he would also point out that most human lives are not like the above cases. As he remarks, “...the worst part of many people’s lives is often at the end” (2013, 142). In order to keep things simple, let us then consider a case in which the worst moments occur in the last year of one’s long life. When the Australian botanist, David Goodall, decided to end his life at the age of 104, he remarked: “I’ve lived quite a good life until recently. The last year has been less satisfactory for me because I couldn’t do things” (*The New York Times*, 3 May 2018). What should we say about Goodall’s life? Should we say that his life as a whole was uniformly very bad, or that it was very bad only in the last year? And if the latter, does that mean that the significant portion of his life was good?

Benatar’s answer is clear: to concede that there are parts in one’s life that are not bad is not to concede that these parts are good. This is why Benatar would argue that Goodall’s assessment of

9 This does not also mean that a person, as Benatar says, should not be allowed to be mistaken about the quality of his own life (see 2006).

his own life was mistaken, and that the root cause of that mistake lies in the fact that “it is possible to overestimate the quality of a life that *is* worth continuing. Such a life may not be as good as one thinks it is but it may nonetheless be *good enough* to be worth continuing” (2012, 159; second emphasis added). Therefore, while Benatar would not deny that Goodall’s life was worth continuing until it reached the end, he would most certainly deny that it was worth continuing because it was good. He would insist that Goodall’s life, when taken as a whole, was actually very bad.

What we want to know is how this statement fits into the overall picture defended by Benatar. On the one hand, he grants that a human life could be “good enough to be worth continuing”, but on the other hand, he also believes that all human lives are very bad. It is the conjunction of these two beliefs that creates a difficulty and requires clarification.

It should be pointed out that Benatar’s observations are entirely compatible with there being good human lives. If most of Goodall’s life (to be precise, more than a hundred years) was good enough to be worth continuing, then there is a sense in which this is all that really matters. No doubt, the quality of Goodall’s life (as is the case with all human lives) was far from perfect, but does that necessarily make Goodall’s *entire* life very bad? To say that one’s life is “good enough to be worth continuing” is not to say that one’s life is perfect and that it could not possibly be of better quality. For it could be that the quality of one’s life is barely above an acceptable level. But to say that one’s life is good enough to be worth continuing is to say something important – namely that one’s life belongs in a different category than a life whose quality is below the threshold for lives worth continuing. This is why it might seem appropriate to think that good lives are in fact all those lives that are placed above the threshold for lives worth continuing (despite their mutual quality differences), and that bad ones are those that are placed below it. Since a “good enough” life and a “highest quality” life are both placed above the threshold, one might say that both lives are good and that the difference between them is just a matter of degree.

To drive this point home, suppose a student receives a pass for his work and the teacher tells him that his work is very bad. What attitude should the student take toward the teacher’s comment? Under the assumption that he himself would be disappointed with the grade, he might agree that his work could have been much better had he put more effort in it, and that receiving a pass – especially when compared to a first class pass – is really nothing to be proud of. Still, even if he agrees with all that, a student might find the teacher’s comment hard to understand. Namely, if his work is indeed very bad, he could ask, then why did he receive a pass in the first place? The fact that it is far below the work of those who received a first class pass, he might argue, at most makes his work less good, not very bad. His work would have been bad (or even very bad) had he received a fail, but that did not happen.

Returning to Goodall’s case, the interpretation according to which his life was good is, therefore, not ruled out by Benatar. Once again, since Benatar concedes that there is a threshold for lives worth continuing, one is then able to say that all those lives above that threshold, Goodall’s life included, are in fact *good* lives. For to evaluate even those lives as very bad seems puzzling, especially in light of the fact that the existence of the threshold is not something that Benatar would be prepared to deny. I am not suggesting that Goodall’s life was in fact good, but only that such evaluation of his life is more congruent with there being a demarcation line between lives that are and those that are not worth continuing.

Let us now consider what one could say in defense of Benatar’s view. Returning to the movie analogy, one could respond that a very bad movie could be worth watching if a person, while watching it, develops an interest in the plot. Since this interest could be defeated by leaving the cinema, it would provide one with a reason to stay. If this explanation is plausible, then perhaps there is nothing strange in the assertion that some human lives are worth continuing despite them being very bad. For Benatar argues that “those who already exist (in the morally relevant sense) have an interest in continuing to exist” (2012, 158), and that an individual “stands to lose much more by dying or being killed” as this interest gets stronger (2006, 151).

This defence faces the following difficulty. When a person develops an *interest* in the plot of a very bad movie, this essentially means that a person *desires* to see how the plot of a very bad movie unfolds. However, if a movie is not worth continuing in the first place, it is difficult to imagine

that this could be changed by the mere fact that one desires to watch it.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, if one's life is not worth continuing, it will remain that way even if the individual who lives that life has a desire to continue living. This seems to undermine the suggestion that one's interest may be relevant to whether a life is worth continuing.

But this would be too quick. We should be careful not to put too much weight on Benatar's movie analogy. While it may be all right to think that one's interest in the movie is reducible to a desire, it is questionable whether the same is true in the case of an interest in continuing to live. Thus, Benatar writes that it is not obvious that "an interest in continued existence, when unpacked, must make reference to any *desire*. It is entirely possible that one's interests are served by continued life even if one does not desire it" (2006, 150; emphasis in original).

Still, while this at most shows that the analogy should be taken with caution, it remains to be explained how one's interest could be "served by continued life" if one's life is very bad? Benatar's answer is this: if one would "lose much more" by going out of existence than by continuing to exist, it would be in one's interest to continue living one's life. Even if a person's life is very bad, he thinks, it could sometimes be worse for one not to continue living it. While all lives are very bad, that does not mean that death could not be even worse.

It is important to be clear about what Benatar is saying here. He is not saying that one's very bad life might be worth continuing because one's death could be bad for other people who are closely related to that person. For, even if one continued to live a very bad life just because other people would be negatively affected by one's death, that would still not show that it were in that person's interest to continue living. If the quality of a person's life is so bad that one's interest in continuing to live is defeated, it is difficult to believe that the fact that other people would be bereaved by one's death could somehow offset the badness of one's life and make it worth continuing.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps one's life in that case could be regarded as worth continuing to other people, not to the person whose life it is. Thus, Benatar thinks that "[i]t may even be indecent for family members to expect [someone whose life is below the threshold] to continue living" (2006, 220). Benatar's claim that death is bad, therefore, must not be understood as the claim that one's death could be bad for those who stay behind (although this is beyond doubt), but rather that it could be bad for the person who dies. His suggestion is that some people's lives are worth continuing, not because they are of good quality, but because continuing to live is, at least for some people, a lesser evil.

The problem, however, is that our initial worry still remains unanswered. The fact that people have an interest in continuing to live helps us see why some lives are worth continuing, but it does not tell us that lives worth continuing are very bad. Benatar here at most establishes that continuing to live is sometimes better than death. But this is something that most people believe anyway. The claim under consideration is not that there are lives worth continuing, but rather that there are *very bad lives worth continuing*. Again, since Benatar does not deny that an interest in continuing to live can be "defeated by the poor quality of life" (2006, 218), why assume that a person's life is very bad even in those cases in which this interest is not defeated?

According to some authors, a good life is sometimes *defined* as a life that is worth continuing. As John Broome says, there are certain contexts in which "to say [one's] life is good generally *means* it is better for the person that she should continue to live rather than die now" (Broome 1999, 167; emphasis added). Of course, I am not suggesting that Benatar is forced to acknowledge that there are good human lives because "good life" can mean "life worth continuing". The claim I am defending here is rather this: while Benatar's acknowledgment that some human lives are worth continuing seems to be compatible with there being good human lives, it blurs the sense in which lives worth continuing are very bad. The problem with his view is that there is no clear sense in which lives worth continuing are very bad. If these lives are very bad, why does he think that they are good enough to be above the line?

10 Consider, for example, the similar remark by Jonathan Dancy: "...if someone wants something that there is no reason to want, his desire does not give him some reason for doing it, a reason that was not there before. If an action is silly, wanting to do it does not make it any less silly" (Dancy 2000, 36–37).

11 In his conversation with Sam Harris (2017), Benatar agrees that the bad effects one's death could have on other people are "powerful confounding factors" and that he is "happy to leave those aside".

This is not to say that these lives are good, but only that the possibility that they are good is not ruled out. And this should be enough to call into doubt his major thesis that all human lives are very bad. Since Benatar's arguments do not rule out the view that some human lives are good, I conclude that insofar as his arguments support (2) and (3), they no longer support (1).

## Conclusion

I have argued that Benatar's arguments do not support (1), (2) and (3) all at once. Since he concedes that some human lives are above the threshold for lives worth continuing, he needs to prove that even these lives are very bad. For, no matter how far they are from perfection, they are still above the threshold, so evaluating them as very bad, one could object, does not seem accurate. Furthermore, insofar as his arguments do establish that some very bad lives are worth continuing, I have suggested, they do so at the cost of failing to prove that there are some human lives not worth continuing. And finally, if Benatar sets the threshold much higher, as I have argued he should, he would then need to acknowledge that no human life is worth continuing. But this is the conclusion he wishes to avoid.

Although my intention in the last section was not to argue that there are good human lives, but only that Benatar did not prove that some human lives are not good, it does seem that the best explanation of why some human lives are worth continuing is that they are good lives. Once it is admitted that there is a threshold and that the quality of some human lives is "good enough" in the sense that it is better for those who live them to continue to do so, there is room to argue that the difference between human lives worth continuing and perfect lives is just a matter of degree. A perfect life, it could be maintained, is just another good life; it is just like any other life above the threshold. While there is no doubt that some lives above the threshold are better than others, what they all have in common is that they are all lives worth continuing. And perhaps there is nothing more to a good life than the fact that it is worth continuing.

To say that some human lives are good in the sense of being worth continuing is to say something that is objectively true: it is to concede that human lives differ in their actual or objective quality. But that does not entail that lives worth continuing are immune to further comparison. Even if it is true that some human lives are objectively good lives – in the sense that they are worth continuing – it does not follow that all good lives are *equally* good lives. It is perfectly consistent to think that there are many objectively good lives and at the same time acknowledge that some of these lives are better than others.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank David Benatar, Ninoslav Križić and Neven Sesardić for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to the two anonymous reviewers of the *South African Journal of Philosophy* for their valuable and insightful suggestions. This work was supported by the Croatian Science Foundation under grant HRZZ-UIP-2017-05-4308.

## References

- Benatar, D. 2006. *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199296422.001.0001
- Benatar, D. 2012. "Every Conceivable Harm: A Further Defence of Anti-Natalism." *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31 (1): 128–164. doi:10.1080/02580136.2012.10751773
- Benatar, D. 2013. "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics." *Journal of Ethics* 17 (1-2): 121–151. doi:10.1007/s10892-012-9133-7
- Benatar, D. 2017. *The Human Predicament. A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Broome, J. 1999. *Ethics out of Economics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511605888.011
- Dancy, J. 2000. *Practical Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- DeGrazia, D. 2010. "Is it wrong to impose the harms of human life? A reply to Benatar." *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 31 (4): 317–331. doi:10.1007/s11017-010-9152-y

- Harman, E. 2009. “Critical Study: David Benatar.” *Noûs* (Detroit, Mich.) 43: 776–785. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0068.2009.00727.x
- Harris, S. 2017. Waking Up Podcast #107. *Is Life Actually Worth Living? A Conversation with David Benatar*. <https://samharris.org/podcasts/107-life-actually-worth-living/>
- McGregor, R., and E. Sullivan-Bissett. 2012. “Better No Longer to Be.” *South African Journal of Philosophy* 31 (1): 55–68. doi:10.1080/02580136.2012.10751767
- Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Plantinga, A. 1974. *God, Freedom, and Evil*. New York: Harper and Row.