

Miles Collison

3702426

Bachelor of Arts

Thesis submission for Master of Arts in Philosophy

Supervisor: Dr Jessica Lerm

‘Anti-Natalism and Internalism’



I declare that **‘Anti-Natalism and Internalism’** is my own work, that it has not been submitted before for any degree or assessment in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'M. Collison' on a light blue background.

Abstract

Is it morally permissible to bring children into existence? We often go our whole lives never asking ourselves this question, since procreation and parenthood are societal norms. However, a local (and controversial) philosopher, David Benatar, thinks there are strong philosophical reasons to abstain from procreation. In his book, *Better Never to Have Been*, he presents the argument that bringing children into existence is morally impermissible on account that coming into existence is always a harm. This argument has been met with much criticism and scrutiny, thus producing a great deal of contemporary literature. One more recent critic is Nicholas Smyth. His claim, as opposed to the many others who have focused on the small details of Benatar's work, is more deeply fundamental; Smyth claims that Benatar, as well as the procreation ethicists who have gone on to discuss his work, are not doing ethics at all. Smyth argues for a shift in moral philosophy that rests on the claim that each moral philosopher ought to answer two important questions: 'What actions should I take?', and 'Why?' This fundamental criticism grows out of the meta-ethical literature on internalism, the thesis that moral judgements are necessarily motivating in and of themselves. Therefore, in addressing Smyth's objection, this project brings together two separate philosophical literatures, the ethical literature surrounding anti-natalism (or procreative ethics) and the meta-ethical literature surrounding the internalism/externalism debate. In this project, I present Benatar's argument for anti-natalism, assess Smyth's objection to Benatar as well as other procreative ethicists, and then finally consider the internalism/externalism debate to determine if this new fundamental critique serves not only as a plausible refutation of anti-natalism, but also as a justifiable cause for a shift in the way moral philosophy operates.

Key words: David Benatar, Nicholas Smyth, anti-natalism, procreation ethics, asymmetry, the practical problem, prospective children, internalism, externalism, the authority problem.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
1. Anti-Natalism: The Anti-Procreation Theory	3
<i>1.1. The Importance of Discussing Procreation</i>	3
<i>1.2. The Asymmetry Argument</i>	4
<i>1.3. The Other Asymmetries</i>	6
2. A New Response to the Anti-Natalists	6
<i>2.1. Some Initial Objections to Benatar</i>	8
<i>2.2. Finding a New Approach</i>	12
<i>2.3. Smyth v. Procreation Ethics</i>	14
<i>2.4. Smyth on Applied Ethics</i>	17
<i>2.5. Smyth's Existential Grounding</i>	19
3. Analysing Smyth's Critique	22
<i>3.1. The Problems with Smyth's Applied Ethics</i>	22
<i>3.2. Defining what Adequately Answers the Questions</i>	26
<i>3.3. The Problems with Smyth's existential grounding</i>	29
4. The Foundation of Smyth's Critique	32
<i>4.1 The Foundation of the Practical and Authority Problems</i>	32
<i>4.2 An Internalist Critique?</i>	36
5. The Plausibility of Internalism	39
<i>5.1 The internalist/externalist debate</i>	40
<i>5.2 The Amoralist problem</i>	44
<i>5.3 The Amoralist manifest</i>	46
Conclusion	50
References	52

Introduction

In the following paper, I present the views of David Benatar, who in his book, *Better Never to Have Been*, presents the argument that bringing children into existence is morally impermissible on account that coming into existence is always a harm. His argument has been met with much criticism and scrutiny, thus producing a great deal of contemporary literature. One more recent critic is Nicholas Smyth. His claim, as opposed to the many others who have focused on the small details of Benatar's work, is more deeply fundamental; Smyth claims that Benatar is not doing ethics at all. Smyth argues for a shift in moral philosophy that rests on the claim that each moral philosopher ought to answer two important questions: 'What actions should I take?', and 'Why?' This fundamental criticism grows out of the meta-ethical literature on internalism, the thesis that moral judgements are necessarily motivating in and of themselves.

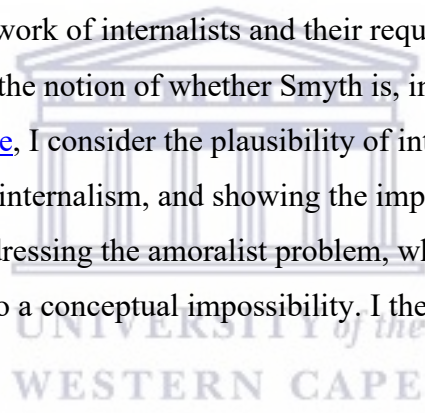
In this project I exposit Smyth's argument that anti-natalism is not only a flawed thesis, but also that the very theorists who take part in the discourse on the permissibility of procreation are not doing the right kind of moral philosophy. Given that his argument stems from the internalist doctrine, I also argue not only that his critique is flawed, but also that the internalist view which he relies on runs into problems as well.

I challenge Smyth's critique on four points:

1. His concept of applied ethics is flawed.
2. His praise of Peter Singer's work shows that he does not present a clear manner in which to adequately answer the questions of practicality and authority which he presents.
3. The 'existential grounding' he presents is deeply flawed and presents problems for the moral philosophy he advocates for.
4. He does not do enough to address the problems with the internalist doctrine he relies on, which I contend is implausible on account of its not adequately addressing the problem presented by amorality.

Therefore, I contend that Smyth's critique does not do enough to adequately challenge the anti-natalist thesis.

In [section one](#), I present the anti-natalist thesis, paying particular attention to the work of David Benatar. I also present an early precise of Smyth's general criticism. In [section two](#), I present the work of those who have challenged Benatar's anti-natalism, and how their arguments have been found wanting. I then exposit Smyth's critique fully, showing the manner in which his project stands out among the others who have thus far challenged anti-natalism. In [section three](#), I analyse Smyth's critique, challenging his concept of applied ethics, as well as arguing that he does not provide a clear enough notion of what adequately addresses the question of practicality and authority which he cites as fundamental to moral philosophy. I then also present the problems with his proposed 'existential grounding'. In [section four](#), I explore the foundation of Smyth's critique, looking at the work of internalists and their requirements for the normativity of moral judgements, and consider the notion of whether Smyth is, in fact, putting forward an internalist critique. In [section five](#), I consider the plausibility of internalism, taking a look at the debate between externalism and internalism, and showing the implausibility of internalism on account of its not adequately addressing the amoralist problem, which is now to be considered a real life possibility, as opposed to a conceptual impossibility. I then [conclude](#).



1. Anti-Natalism: The Anti-Procreation Theory

1.1. The Importance of Discussing Procreation

In his paper, ‘What is the Question to Which Anti-Natalism is the Answer?’, Nicholas Smyth aims to change the way in which we view applied ethics. His project, as well as the project of this thesis, is a critical analysis of a rather controversial question of permissibility, and that is the permissibility of procreation. To begin with, we will look at the theory that it is wrong to procreate (anti-natalism), and much of our discussion will focus on the theorist whom many consider to be the pioneer of this thesis, David Benatar.

Many lay people in particular might question the worth of providing any kind of academic analysis of anti-natalism, given that so many of us may go our whole lives without giving the permissibility of procreation much thought, if any at all. However, modern statistics surrounding childbirth have given rise to the need for such a critical discussion of procreation. According to Emmanuel Obi,¹ there is noted correlation between high birth rates and the stagnation of poverty reduction, suggesting that one way to tackle poverty is to have fewer children. One study states that as of 2011, “children under the age of 15 constitute more than 40% of the total population of the low-income countries,”² and evidence shows that countries which have applied family planning programs have achieved both high and sustained levels of economic growth.³ The issue of a high birth rate not only leads to a lack of resources for the children stuck in poverty, but we can also connect the problems of high birth rate to a lack of resources overall. According to another study, malnutrition rose by 37% between 1950 and 2007, and can be linked to 6 million child deaths a year.⁴

Additionally, high population growth is directly correlated to environmental degradation. In ‘The Climate Crisis: Why Population Matters’,⁵ a report on the connection between climate change

¹ Obi (2020)

² Obi (2020, 9)

³ Obi (2020, 9)

⁴ Hamisi (2022, 28)

⁵ Howard (2022)

and population growth, it was found that due to the constant rise in population, there is also a perpetual need for space, which leads to deforestation and destruction of vital carbon sinks (areas which absorb large amounts of carbon) which are necessary to stave off drastic climate change.⁶ There is, therefore, undoubtedly a reason to question if this course of consistent procreation is permissible, and anti-natalism seems to be extremely pertinent to this discussion.

In his paper, “Why it is Better Never to Come into Existence”,⁷ David Benatar provides a somewhat scaled down, though mostly similar argument to what later became his seminal work, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*.⁸ This argument being, as the titles suggest, that coming into existence is *always* worse than not coming into existence.⁹ This latter seminal work has spawned over 167 reviews and responses, excluding the responses from Benatar himself.¹⁰ These works range from fundamental criticisms to stern defences of the views that Benatar presented. Given these details, it is clear to see that there is a great deal of both disagreement and agreement from the larger philosophical world regarding this relatively new position on the permissibility of procreation.

1.2. The Asymmetry Argument

So, what exactly is the argument as to why coming into existence is always less preferable to not existing? Interestingly, Benatar does not primarily advocate anti-natalism on the grounds of either poverty-reduction or population control. While he provides numerous arguments, we will focus on the major arguments provided in *Better Never to Have Been* (especially those addressed by Nicholas Smyth, the main subject of the present project). The foundation of Benatar’s anti-natalism begins with what he calls the ‘Asymmetry of Pleasure and Pain’.¹¹ Benatar asks us to treat pleasure and pain as exemplars of good and bad respectfully, and from this we would uncontroversially conclude that:

⁶ Howard (2018, 6)

⁷ Benatar (1997)

⁸ Benatar (2006)

⁹ Benatar (1997, 347)

¹⁰ University of Cape Town (2021)

¹¹ Benatar (2006, 30)

1. The presence of pain is bad
2. The presence of pleasure is good¹²

However, the absence of these properties is not exactly the opposite of the above evaluation. Rather, according to Benatar, it seems evident that:

3. The absence of pain is good, despite there not being anyone who enjoys this good.
4. The absence of pleasure is *not bad*, unless someone is deprived of it.¹³

Coming into existence entails experiencing both pleasure and pain (goods and bads), but not coming into existence entails avoiding pain and pleasure altogether.¹⁴ While the avoidance of pain is good, the absence of pleasure is not bad, since there is no one deprived of this pleasure. Hence, Benatar concludes that it is always preferable to not come into existence. Any prospective parent who brings someone into existence effectively exposes that person to harm and therefore commits an impermissible act, since, according to Benatar, coming into existence always inflicts a considerable deal of harm.¹⁵ Thus, procreation should be considered an impermissible act. This is Benatar's main argument for anti-natalism.

One might read the foregoing argument and protest by claiming that life, though it may contain some (or even many) harms, also contains many *pleasures*, which presumably outweigh those harms.¹⁶ However, Benatar presents a second major argument in favour of his anti-natalist position, known as the Quality of Life argument, which is that our lives are considerably worse than we think, since our self-assessments will always be inaccurate given certain positive biased psychological responses that occur when we consider the state of our lives (pollyannaism, adaptation, accommodation and habituation).¹⁷ These factors make it hard to accurately determine how good our lives are, and therefore, even if it feels like our lives are more

¹² Benatar (2006, 30)

¹³ Benatar (2006, 30)

¹⁴ Benatar (2006, 31)

¹⁵ Benatar (2006, 61)

¹⁶ Aaron Smuts (2013) and Thaddeus Metz (2011), who are later discussed, present arguments similar to this.

¹⁷ Benatar (2006, 60 – 92)

pleasurable than they are painful, we are likely mistaken. Thus, Benatar's asymmetry argument stands.

After all we have so far discussed, it may help to first briefly consider Smyth's argument, to put into perspective the scope of Smyth's overall conclusion. His claim, in short, is that philosophers who discuss the permissibility of procreation are answering vague questions, as opposed to more direct and practical ones. Any thesis on procreation comes up short in showing its practical worth, given the vague and impersonal perspective from which they write. Their work does not hold enough weight to be considered useful for applied ethics. Thus, if Smyth's criticism is to hold true, we can see that quite a large literature (counting those who respond in favour of Benatar as well) would be affected.

Benatar is by no means the only philosopher to present a view that finds fault with the permissibility of procreation. In his own work, he highlights the arguments of Seana Shiffrin¹⁸ and Christoph Fehige,¹⁹ both of whose work would be susceptible to the arguments presented by Nicholas Smyth should his criticisms prove to be plausible. Since Smyth does not himself focus on these philosophers, however, we will cover them briefly simply for the sake of seeing how far Smyth's criticisms seem to extend.

1.3. The Other Asymmetries

Shiffrin's argument presents an asymmetry that is unique to Benatar's. Her claim is that should it be the case that one does not expressly wish for the contrary, it is permissible to inflict a lesser harm on some person to prevent a greater harm. However, it is not permissible to inflict a harm (without clear consent) that would provide a greater benefit.²⁰ She bases her arguments on thought experiments, and states that since those who exist all suffer harm, even if coming into existence can benefit someone, we may not inflict any harm to yield that benefit. While existing people can authorise the infliction of harm for the sake of a benefit, those who do not exist

¹⁸ Shiffrin (1999)

¹⁹ Fehige (1998)

²⁰ Shiffrin (1999, 127)

cannot provide that consent, nor can we presume their hypothetical consent.²¹ Hence it is not permissible to bring a child into existence, given this slightly similar-to-Benatar's asymmetry between harms and benefits.

Additionally, Benatar believes that Christoph Fehige's argument is closer to his own than Shiffrin's. Fehige argues for a view called antifrustrationism, which is the thesis that a satisfied preference and the non-existence of a preference are equally good, whereas an unsatisfied preference is bad.²² In other words, it is good to have a satisfied desire (a pleasure) but not having that desire at all is just as good (or, as Benatar had it, the absence of pleasure is not bad if there is no one for whom that pleasure is being taken from). Under this principle then, it is better not to procreate, since this newly existent person's unsatisfied preferences will be worse than the preferences that they would not have had if they had never come into existence.²³ Thus Fehige argues for a similar anti-natalist position to Benatar, only instead basing his premises in the desires satisfied and those not satisfied, yet coming to the same conclusion that Benatar's asymmetry leads to.

Considering the theories and arguments discussed, one would be apt to think that Smyth's criticism is specifically against these anti-natalist views. However, this would be a mistake. Smyth not only lobbies his criticism at these anti-natalists, but rather at what he calls 'procreation ethicists' at large.²⁴ His criticism therefore *also* includes the work of those who provide views in favour of the permissibility of procreation, because of the kind of considerations to which they appeal. We will focus on these pro-natal arguments when we look at Smyth's criticisms in the next section. What we see here is just how far-reaching the consequences will be, should Smyth's criticism succeed.

²¹ Shiffrin (1999, 130 - 133)

²² Fehige (1998, 509 - 519)

²³ Fehige (1998, 521 - 523)

²⁴ Smyth (2020, 71)

2. A New Response to the Anti-Natalists

2.1. Some Initial Objections to Benatar

As we discussed in the previous section, Benatar's anti-natalist work spawned quite a significant amount of literature. As anyone can imagine, many of these responses were not in favour of his view, given the rather troubling consequences that come with the anti-natalist view. These responses have come in numerous languages, and most of these responses have attacked the smaller details of Benatar's argument, notably the infamous 'Asymmetry Argument'. Benatar has responded to almost all of these attacks, and his defences are almost always simple, elegant and persuasive.²⁵ Thus, it seems clear that any response to Benatar's work that aims to present any real kind of threat ought to do so in a more fundamental sense that does not rely on nit-picking at the smaller details of his wider argument.

Some of the arguments that challenge Benatar's anti-natalism on a fundamental level come from the likes of Elizabeth Harman²⁶ and Erik Magnusson.²⁷ These arguments focus on the personal/impersonal distinction, where the personal is that which relates directly to an agent, and the impersonal that which relates to all beings in general, in a more third-personal sense. They are among several theorists who have questioned whether Benatar's thesis can get away with equivocating what seems to be an impersonalist view with a personalist view. Harman, for instance, argues that the absence of pain may be good in an impersonal sense, but that in the personal sense, the absence of pleasure which is not being experienced by a potential being²⁸ is not good, since a being's not coming into existence would hinder that pleasure or prevent them from experiencing it. In other words, if we were to consider the perspective of the being that would have come into existence, there actually *is* a deprivation of pleasure given that this being would be deprived of that potential pleasure should they not come into existence. This runs

²⁵ Benatar (2012)

²⁶ Harman (2009)

²⁷ Magnusson (2019)

²⁸ Harman (2009, 782)

directly counter to Benatar's argument, where the absence of pleasure is only *not bad* from a *third-person perspective*.

Magnusson makes a very similar argument,²⁹ however, he goes on to conclude that existence is preferable to non-existence since the benefits of existing outweigh the absence of benefits in non-existence.³⁰ His claim is that if we were to consider the perspective of the potential being in question, it seems obvious that, similarly to wanting to avoid pain, they would have an interest in maximising their benefits of which they would be deprived should they not come into existence. The absence of benefits in this case would be considerably worse than the presence of harm (given that this benefit is now being withheld), and thus, from a personal perspective, it would always be better to come into existence.³¹ Both of the foregoing arguments point towards Benatar's reliance on using an impersonal perspective to draw his conclusion, and thus there seems to be merit in undermining this reliance on such a perspective, given that the claims he makes may hold no weight from a more personal perspective (*viz.* from the perspective of those who would or would not come into existence). Benatar has, however, responded to this general line of argument in 'Still Better Never to Have Been'³² by presenting what is referred to by Smyth as the 'two possible worlds defence'.³³ Benatar clarifies that his conclusion is meant to say that in the case of two possible worlds, the one in which a person never exists would be comparably better for the person who does exist in another,³⁴ which is meant to abate the claim that his thesis relies on an impersonal perspective, since this takes into account the perspectives of agents in two possible worlds, making it more personal. I return to the question of the personalist/impersonalist of Benatar's argument is [section 3](#), below.

Beyond these two theorists who have touched on the question of equivocating impersonal views with personal views are others such as Andrew Oberg and Aaron Smuts. Oberg, while presenting a similar claim to both Harman and Magnusson, claims, in 'Asymmetry, Suffering and Coping',³⁵

²⁹ Magnusson (2019, 4)

³⁰ Magnusson (2019, 6)

³¹ Magnusson (2019, 4 – 6)

³² Benatar (2013)

³³ Smyth (2020, 75)

³⁴ Benatar (2013, 124)

³⁵ Oberg (2019)

that we cannot judge the pleasure or pain of a non-existing being from our own perspective since ours could vastly differ from the potential being's, making Benatar's argument impersonal given its third-person forced perspective.³⁶ He argues that even if we were to choose to take the perspective of the potential being, whatever conclusion we reach about what it is they would desire or choose to avoid would nonetheless come from *our* perspective, and not the potential being's perspective.³⁷ Firstly, no one can truly speak for the perspective of another save for the person in question, and thus even among the existent, we cannot *truly* conclude what *their* perspective might be. Secondly, in attempting to adjudicate between the deprivation of pain or pleasure, we can only do so from the perspective of existence. Nothing can truly be said for the non-existent's perspective because they do not exist to make a decision on whether the absence of pleasure is not bad or good.³⁸ It would seem Oberg would prefer to take an impartial, third-personal stance that does not assume the perspective of the non-existent being.

Aaron Smuts, in 'To Be or Never to Have Been: Anti-Natalism and a Life Worth Living'³⁹, argues that those who have lives worth living are not harmed when we take an 'all-things-considered' perspective.⁴⁰ He argues that Benatar's asymmetry does not even do enough to show us that it is better to not exist at all when comparing existence to non-existence.⁴¹ His argument is that Benatar's asymmetry simply shows that not coming into existence is a net good, not that coming into existence cannot be better. He points out that Benatar's conclusion from the asymmetry is that coming into existence has no advantage against not coming into existence, but this relies on a doubtful notion of what constitutes an advantage, since it rests on the claim that for the presence of pleasure to be an advantage to the non-existent, it would need to be the case that the absence of this pleasure be bad.⁴² Smuts argues that this is a mistake, since a good *can* be better than something that is *not bad*, and something that is not bad can be less good than something that is just good. The asymmetry, according to Smuts, does not do enough to show from these considerations, that coming into existence is always bad, since it can possibly be

³⁶ Oberg (2019, 4 – 5)

³⁷ Oberg (2019, 5)

³⁸ Oberg (2019, 6)

³⁹ Smuts (2013)

⁴⁰ Smuts (2013, 720 – 724)

⁴¹ Smuts (2013, 719)

⁴² Smuts (2013, 719)

better to brought into existence given that the presence of pleasure *can* be an advantage of the absence of pleasure that is not deprived.

Thaddeus Metz,⁴³ on the other hand, argues that for Benatar to thoroughly conclude that existence is worse when compared to non-existence, we need a notion of the magnitudes of the good and the bad.⁴⁴ Similarly to Smuts, he does not believe that the asymmetry conclusively shows that coming into existence is always bad (and for more or less the same reasons). His claim is that we cannot draw the conclusion without knowing the degree of badness or goodness involved in the potential life being discussed. It is not enough, as Benatar does, to simply conclude that existence is always a harm, without somehow indicating the degree in which this harm is greater than the pleasure.⁴⁵ What Metz does, which separates him from Smuts, is attempt to tackle Benatar's argument as a whole, whereas Smuts focused on two particular parts while leaving out important other implications of Benatar's conclusion.

Benatar has responded both directly (as in the case of Metz)⁴⁶ and indirectly (by manner of responding to arguments that present relatively similar ideas) to these theorists. At the same time, it is ironic that many of these arguments, including Metz's and Smuts', which point out (and pick at) the impersonalist perspective from which Benatar presents his arguments are themselves written in a rather impersonal, mostly impartial manner. Similarly, this method of philosophizing seems to apply to the aforementioned anti-natalists ([section 1.3](#)), Fehige and Shiffrin, as well. This does not necessarily discount the arguments presented by these philosophers (at least not on the basis of them simply being written from impartiality) but it does speak to the kind of responses that have been presented to Benatar's argument thus far, and perhaps even the kind of discourse that takes place in the discussion of the permissibility of procreation itself. This is an important element to note regarding the discussion of procreation ethics thus far, given that it helps to contextualise an important critique from Smyth that we will later consider ([section 2.5](#)) regarding the problems surrounding applied ethics as a whole. Nonetheless, these arguments,

⁴³ Metz (2011)

⁴⁴ Metz (2011, 246)

⁴⁵ Metz (2011, 250)

⁴⁶ Benatar (2012)

particularly those which directly attack the premises of the asymmetry, have, according to Benatar, been found lacking.

2.2. Finding a New Approach

It is in search for a position that provides a new, more fundamental criticism to Benatar's account, that we turn to Nicholas Smyth. His argument is quite complex, since it avoids the potential pitfalls of previous theorists by not focusing on the premises that lead to Benatar's anti-natalist conclusion. Rather, his critique attacks the fundamental basis from which Benatar presents his arguments. His argument stems from a rich philosophical literature and may be hard to follow given its unusual approach, but *this* is exactly what makes his view stand out among the rest of those who have so far challenged Benatar.

In 'What Is the Question to which Anti-Natalism Is the Answer?', Smyth challenges what he calls 'procreation ethicists' on two fronts, 'the practical question'⁴⁷ and 'the authority problem'.⁴⁸ Smyth begins by presenting four kinds of questions that he believes moral philosophers might attempt to answer. He lists them as:

1. Which actions should I take?
2. Which actions of mine will best promote valuable outcomes?
3. Which types of actions will best promote valuable outcomes?
4. What are the most valuable outcomes?⁴⁹

Smyth considers this first question to be the "practical question."⁵⁰ He draws on the works of philosophers Thomas Nagel,⁵¹ Susan Wolf,⁵² Bernard Williams⁵³ and Christine Korsgaard,⁵⁴ and

⁴⁷ Smyth (2020, 72)

⁴⁸ Smyth (2020, 73)

⁴⁹ Smyth (2020, 71)

⁵⁰ Smyth (2020, 72)

⁵¹ Nagel (1989)

⁵² Wolf (1997)

⁵³ Williams (1985)

⁵⁴ Korsgaard (1996)

presents their common conclusion that this first question cannot be answered by presenting a set of “impartially generated truths about valuable outcomes or possible worlds.”⁵⁵ He argues that to answer questions of this kind (practical questions), we “must have some account of how a series of facts is related to an agent’s practical perspective, such that an encounter with those facts could produce intentions to act.”⁵⁶ In other words, any philosopher that aims to present an answer to the question of ‘What actions should I take?’ ought to relate that answer directly to an agent’s perspective. Smyth tells us that this leads to what he calls the ‘practicality problem’; “[W]hat is the relation between moral considerations and the actual intentions of rational human agents? How can we act on those considerations?”⁵⁷

He also presents what he calls ‘the authority problem’: “[W]hy do the dictates of an impartial moral perspective trump reasons arising from other viewpoints?”⁵⁸ In particular, here he engages with Bernard Williams’ and Christine Korsgaard’s views that even if we solve the practical problem, even if certain moral considerations may connect with an agent who wants to be a good person’s practical considerations, “this does not entail that they always ought to prioritize those considerations over other ones, nor does it even entail that they ought to give those considerations very much weight at all.”⁵⁹

One may read these initial arguments from Smyth and ask, ‘What is it about this argument that makes Smyth’s criticism unique?’ It is the fundamental nature in which it challenges Benatar (and additional procreative ethicists). Smyth presents/makes use of a meta-ethical orientation which states that any moral philosopher who aims to provide moral verdicts must provide a solution to the practicality and authority problems. He claims that “if the procedure is not one that an actual decision-maker can recognize and incorporate into their lives, then the verdict simply cannot gain the right sort of traction.”⁶⁰ In other words, any moral judgment that dictates the decisions one should make ought to relate to an agent’s practical (and personal) perspective.

⁵⁵ Smyth (2020, 72)

⁵⁶ Smyth (2020, 72)

⁵⁷ Smyth (2020, 72 - 73)

⁵⁸ Smyth (2020, 73)

⁵⁹ Smyth (2020, 73)

⁶⁰ Smyth (2020, 73)

At the same time, these moral considerations ought to hold some kind of authoritative value which ranks them higher than other considerations.

Smyth's meta-ethical orientation is particularly hostile to procreative ethics, where, as we have noted, most theorists write seemingly from an impersonal third-person perspective. This kind of argument not only attacks the fundamental basis from which Benatar's thesis is written, but it attacks the very nature of the manner in which procreation ethics has been discussed so far. Especially when you consider that none of these theorists seem to address the issue Smyth considers to be vital to a moral ethical outlook which dictates how agents ought to act. I believe these factors all help to make Smyth's critique potentially devastating for Benatar's thesis.

It should be noted that Smyth has written a follow-up paper again critiquing Benatar. In 'Nothing Personal: On the Limits of the Impersonal Temperament in Ethics',⁶¹ Smyth focuses his argument on a newer work of Benatar's, titled *The Human Predicament*,⁶² particularly focusing on Benatar's argument regarding the meaningfulness (meaninglessness) of life. This paper is worth noting not only because Smyth brings up some of the same critiques he presented previously, but also because Benatar *has* responded to this newer paper. To be clear, however, Smyth's follow-up paper is very much a new argument against Benatar's work on the meaninglessness of life that does not affect much of what is written in this project. In 'Misconceived: Why These Further Criticisms of Anti-Natalism Fail',⁶³ Benatar touches on some of Smyth's criticisms, but it too does not affect much of what we discuss in this paper, since Benatar's argument does not address some of the fundamental criticisms lobbied by Smyth, nor the conclusion that Smyth presents in his initial paper.

2.3. Smyth v. Procreation Ethics

As Benatar seems to be the pioneer of the recent upsurge in procreative ethics discussions, much of Smyth's criticism lies almost solely on Benatar's work. When considering the asymmetry

⁶¹ Smyth (2022)

⁶² Benatar (2017)

⁶³ Benatar (2022)

argument, Smyth makes a point of noting that Benatar has already been accused of presenting an impersonal argument (as we saw in the case of Harman, Magnusson and Oberg) and argues that Benatar's 'two possible worlds' defence does not solve the issue of relating directly to the agent's practical perspective, since the question of what is better (or worse) *for a person* is not the same as what is *the better world* in a comparative sense, "nor has anyone shown that it is the question they *ought* to be asking."⁶⁴ When prospective parents wish to have children, they are not concerned with comparing two possible worlds.⁶⁵ Benatar, in his comparison of non-existence to existence, is answering a more abstract question (What are the most valuable outcomes?) rather than the practical question (Which actions should I take?)⁶⁶ which he ought to be answering.

Smyth⁶⁷ then presents the argument of Benatar's later work, *Debating Procreation: Is It Wrong to Reproduce?*⁶⁸ in which Benatar presents what is called the 'misanthropic argument'.⁶⁹ Essentially, Benatar argues that human beings cause so much suffering that people should abstain from making them. This is because, according to Benatar, we have a duty to prevent bringing into existence a species that will continue causing harm.⁷⁰ Smyth argues that Benatar again presents third-personal conclusions that do not address the problems of authority and practicality. Rather, he argues that Benatar is arguing from a rule-consequentialist perspective and claims that it is not clear why such impartially delivered facts about global suffering hold any kind of authority over other considerations, or how anyone is meant to relate these facts to any actual agents that are meant to make decisions.⁷¹ In other words, in simply pointing out facts about the hundreds of millions who have died due to mass killings, or the genocides performed by the likes of Nazi Germany,⁷² or the suffering of the victims of these atrocities and how coming into existence (and bringing new people into existence) is the only reason that any of this happens, Benatar is presenting cases which many agents, while sympathetic towards these

⁶⁴ Smyth, emphasis in the original (2020, 75)

⁶⁵ Smyth (2020, 75)

⁶⁶ Smyth, (2020, 75)

⁶⁷ Smyth (2020, 75)

⁶⁸ Benatar & Wasserman (2015)

⁶⁹ Benatar & Wasserman (2015, 78)

⁷⁰ Benatar & Wasserman (2015, 35)

⁷¹ Smyth (2020, 75)

⁷² Benatar & Wasserman (2015, 81)

victims, do not relate to in the manner which is required to make his argument work. Agents seeking to procreate will not find these considerations to be as authoritative as considerations that relate more closely to their perspective.

Smyth then considers the Quality of Life argument ([section 2.2](#)) regarding how our lives are worse than we think due to our inability to accurately evaluate the badness thereof (due to our positive bias).⁷³ He admits that this is the kind of consideration that *can* count as practical and authoritative to prospective parents, since no possible parent would want to create children whose lives will be bad. However, this argument unfortunately relies on an abstract concept that does not match up to the manner in which ordinary agents reflect on their lives.⁷⁴ To determine how good or bad our lives are, Benatar looks towards quantifiable elements such as financial and physical health as determinants of well-being. Smyth argues that in doing so, Benatar misses the manner in which desire-satisfaction views seem to fall more in line with the manner in which people actually assess their well-being.

According to Smyth, agents do not simply look towards how healthy or wealthy they are to quantify the good or badness of their lives. Rather, for most agents, some desires (perhaps like rearing a family, or even simply finding a good partner) are more central to our lives than others. Counting up which desires go fulfilled and unfulfilled is not the manner in which desire-fulfilment plays a role in people's actual assessment.⁷⁵ These more central desires are harder to quantify or compare in the manner Benatar would like to, and many people seek to achieve these central goals that lead to what many would consider a more fulfilled life, even if there exists only one central goal in a life that may come with a considerable amount of hardship. Thus, Benatar does not seem to be taking into account the actual perspective of agents, given the manner in which he mischaracterises the way they determine the quality of their lives.

As aforementioned, Smyth does not only seem to take issue with Benatar, rather, he seems to take issue with procreative ethicists in general, and therefore, after dealing with Benatar, he moves onto other procreative ethicists who both *approve* of and *disapprove* of procreation. All of

⁷³ Benatar (2006, 64 – 88)

⁷⁴ Smyth (2020, 76)

⁷⁵ Smyth (2020, 76 - 77)

these philosophers present some kind of state of affairs, examples being; procreation is good because it populates the world with agents that will make decisions that change the future,⁷⁶ procreation is good because it ensures that future generations will have a good economy that prevents the world from suffering a terrible death,⁷⁷ procreation is wrong because it is a material practice that relies on the appropriation of large amounts of natural goods.⁷⁸ From this state of affairs, these philosophers then conclude that procreation is either permissible or impermissible. However, like Benatar's anti-natalism (as well as Fehige's and Shiffrin's), none of these works appeal directly to any agent in the first-personal sense, nor is there any substantial explanation given for why any prospective parent should see these judgments as authoritative, and for that reason Smyth deems them lacking. He questions what the purpose of these impartial didactic works are, asking who "is supposed to read [these works], and who is supposed to accept [their] conclusions about procreation?"⁷⁹

2.4. Smyth on Applied Ethics

From here, we start to see the direction in which Smyth is attempting to take us. Smyth considers that some moral philosophers do not believe that moral philosophy is practical in the sense that he describes. In other words, these philosophers do not believe that moral philosophy ought to appeal directly to the agent's perspective. He argues that for these philosophers, moral philosophy aims at theoretical discovery that may answer various meta-physical worries but do not necessarily aim to help agents make direct decisions.⁸⁰ He specifically mentions here externalist moral realists, who believe that practical reasons for actions might just be facts without any further conditionals, and that these facts can fail to motivate agents while maintaining their authoritative status. In other words, they do hold authoritative power, but people may still fail to be motivated by these judgments.⁸¹ Moral philosophy aims at theoretical discovery that may answer various meta-physical worries but does not necessarily aim to help

⁷⁶ Brake (2015, 140) as referenced by Smyth

⁷⁷ Gheaus (2015, 94) as referenced by Smyth

⁷⁸ MacIver (2015, 118) as referenced by Smyth

⁷⁹ Smyth (2020, 79)

⁸⁰ Smyth (2020, 79)

⁸¹ Smyth (2020, 73)

agents make direct decisions.⁸² He claims that: “Indeed, if the task of procreative ethics is simply to register these facts, to note their existence on some cosmic ledger, then perhaps that task has been accomplished by the procreative ethicists I am discussing.”⁸³

Smyth does not believe that this is how applied ethics is meant to function, however. Rather, he argues that applied ethics is meant to help make decisions, and here he presents an example of one such case of applied ethics; Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation*.⁸⁴ This work, despite being mostly considered a work of utilitarianism, held social importance for the manner in which it presented the facts regarding animal suffering and presented a call to action to readers to put an end to this speciesism.⁸⁵ Smyth states that “its arguments resonated deeply with the practical perspectives of millions of readers.”⁸⁶ Smyth contends that if applied ethics is meant to move agents in the right direction as Singer’s work did, then the questions about authority and practicality need to be addressed. Smyth claims that: “if the question to which various natalisms are an answer is merely that of the content of that cosmic ledger, then these natalisms are a distinctly odd, juridical form of applied ethics which is not actually meant to be applied by anyone.”⁸⁷

However, if it is the case that procreative ethics is meant to supply agents with authoritative and practical reasons for accepting their varied conclusions (without necessarily providing an answer to the practical question), then many of these philosophers have failed by not appealing to the practical perspectives of agents given the way in which many of them reach their conclusions. To illustrate this failure, Smyth considers Elizabeth Brake’s argument⁸⁸ that procreation comes with an ecological cost that outweighs prospective parents’ personal desires.⁸⁹ Smyth argues that this fails to capture the agent’s actual perspective, considering that any given individual will likely have such a small ecological footprint, that it seems preposterous to compare that footprint to the extreme costs Brake presents as an issue for procreation. “To call [an individual’s ecological

⁸² Smyth, citing Parfit (2020, 79)

⁸³ Smyth (2020, 79)

⁸⁴ Singer (1975)

⁸⁵ Smyth (2020, 79)

⁸⁶ Smyth (2020, 79)

⁸⁷ Smyth (2020, 80)

⁸⁸ Brake (2015)

⁸⁹ Smyth (2020, 80)

footprint] even a ‘drop in the bucket’ is to give my offspring’s expected ecological footprint far too much significance, whether I have one child or ten.”⁹⁰ In other words, Smyth argues that if an individual’s remaining childfree will not deter some ecological disaster, then arguing from such a [third personal] perspective is not relevant to such an agent’s actual perspective, especially if that agent is considering having children.⁹¹ These, in Smyth’s view, are simply not the right kinds of facts to be citing when addressing the question of whether one should have children.

2.5. Smyth’s Existential Grounding

So, what does Smyth suggest? Firstly, he claims that a good way to summarise the foregoing argument is that there are more personal and less personal ways to do ethics, and that despite his arguments, moral philosophy cannot be entirely personal. In other words, philosophy cannot be geared entirely towards the perspective of particular agents, and sometimes, some impartiality is required. Smyth states that the “activity of philosophy requires a certain abstraction and reflective distance from situational particulars.”⁹² However, as previously noted ([section 2.1](#)), much of the moral philosophy regarding procreative ethics has been written from the purely impersonal perspective (in literature both for and against anti-natalism). Smyth contends that each step towards the abstract (or impersonal) “leaves something behind, and my diagnosis is that each step leaves us successively less able to answer questions about practicality and authority.”⁹³

If we are to answer these questions adequately, Smyth argues that we then ought to find a compromise between the impersonal and personal, and his suggestion is that we appeal to literature, and attempt to achieve the kind of deeply sympathetic response a reader can get from a character’s perspective when delivering our moral philosophy. In his view, this can be achieved not only through fiction, but also (given the nature of moral philosophy) through non-fiction,

⁹⁰ Smyth (2020, 80)

⁹¹ Smyth (2020, 80)

⁹² Smyth (2020, 81)

⁹³ Smyth (2020, 81)

particularly such as in the case of autobiographical writing. The way moral philosophy may appeal to an agent's perspective in the same way that literature would is through what Smyth dubs 'existential grounding'.⁹⁴

To define existential grounding, Smyth argues that memories of particular experiences, such as those brought on by certain smells and sounds, supply us with a sense of continuity and reminds us of our "temporally extended existence."⁹⁵ These kinds of experiences are not describable by predicates like 'pleasurable', but rather can be reached by following the existentialist notion that becoming more conscious of death gives rise to a deeper understanding of the meaning of our lives.⁹⁶ If we were to, for instance, on our deathbed, reflect on the purpose of our lives and decide that our lives have been worth living; can this sort of experience be one which someone can cite as a justification for any kind of judgement? If one were to say that this is the case, then this experience is existentially grounding for that person. It's not an experience that can always be shared, but rather it serves the function of justifying one's life to oneself.

According to Smyth, to many people, procreation and the act of raising a child, is existentially grounding. Smyth contends that children present deeper meaning to some than to others. While others might not necessarily resonate with the view of these agents, Smyth argues that this is compatible with his claim since what's existentially grounding for one may not be so for others. According to Smyth, this existential grounding is what makes procreation ethics so difficult, since it needs to contend with these existentially grounding perspectives which are immediately practical and authoritative and thus likely will be held in higher regard than the kind of impersonal moral considerations presented by pro-natalists or anti-natalists.

To conclude, Smyth makes it clear that he is not attempting to present a pro-natalist perspective. Rather, he is attempting to present a weightier practical consideration which can be shared with one but not all. "Nor do I claim that the existential question is the only practical question that faces deciding agents; after all, almost all of us care about our moral integrity and about the state

⁹⁴ Smyth (2020, 81)

⁹⁵ Smyth (2020, 81)

⁹⁶ Smyth (2020, 82)

of the world more generally.”⁹⁷ He considers that some might consider existential grounding to be a narcissistic outlook, but argues that this is unavoidable given that only the individual can truly look back on their own life and determine the worth of their actions. Thus, it cannot be narcissistic to decide on the basis of one’s individual outlook, given the manner in which individuals actually face the existential question of death. Nonetheless, he argues that while the procreation ethicists he discusses present no solution to the practical and authority problem, his existential grounding presents such a solution.

It is clear then from these considerations that Smyth is arguing for what seems to be a personalist applied ethics, which appeals to practicality and authority on a deeply personal basis. His suggestion is that applied ethics ought to seek to answer the questions of practicality and authority in the same way that his existential grounding concept does, and that some moral considerations may face the difficult task of dealing with authoritative considerations that are already existentially grounding, such as the desire to procreate. This task is made more difficult by ethics’ desire to remain objective, which Smyth suggests is not always the best manner to address the practical question, given the more fundamentally subjective position that is existential grounding. Given our discussion thus far regarding the manner in which procreative ethics has been written about, it is clear that existential grounding may have some significant force for agents over abstract moral facts about the potential risks involved in procreation, or the effects that procreation may have on the world. After all, there must be some reason why, despite the inability of many theorists to successfully counter Benatar’s anti-natalist conclusion, people continue to have children. One possibility might be the power of practical considerations, such as existential grounding, which may always seem more appealing as an authority than any moral consideration that does not address an agent’s perspective in quite the same manner. There is a second potential reason why people may continue to procreate, which we will look at later ([section 5.3](#)).

⁹⁷ Smyth (2020, 83)

3. Analysing Smyth's Critique

While I find Smyth's critique of procreative ethics discussed in the previous section to be unique and a considerably fresh outlook that does not tackle the minute details of anti/pro-natalist arguments, instead choosing to focus on the fundamental basis from which these arguments are formed, I believe that his criticism ultimately fails. I believe it does so on several major points. The first of these is that Smyth presents a very narrow concept of the applied ethics field, particularly one in which every philosopher is attempting to answer the question of 'What is an agent meant to do?'. Even if we were to grant Smyth's meta-ethical concept, he does not do enough to show us why applied ethics ought to be considered such a necessarily narrow field. This issue is further complicated by procreation ethics itself, which does not necessarily fall into this definition of applied ethics that Smyth relies on. Furthermore, I believe Smyth does not provide a clear enough notion of what it means to adequately answer the practical and authority question, particularly when we pay attention to his use of Peter Singer as the ideal for his concept of an applied ethicist.

Finally, I believe that both the existential grounding Smyth presents, as well as the kind of moral philosophy he seeks to establish is problematic. Existential grounding not only allows for abhorrent actions, it also provides a self-centred justification for actions, permitting agents to justify actions based on their own desires: essentially making it a somewhat problematic egoistic practical/authoritative consideration. This then leads to further problems for the kind of moral philosophy Smyth is advocating for.

I address each of these problems in the sections that follow.

3.1. The Problems with Smyth's Applied Ethics

As a preliminary to my argument, it is important to define both applied ethics, as well as normative ethics. Normative ethics is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with what

actions are right and wrong. This branch includes the formulation of moral rules (or normative frameworks) which present a sort of rule-book approach on what actions are right and which actions are considered wrong.⁹⁸ Quite often, these theories need to do more than simply tell us what is right or wrong, they also need to tell us why actions are right or wrong, as well as ground the reasons for why we should take the morally right actions. On the other hand, applied ethics is the branch of philosophy which deals with the application (and the problems that lie therein) of normative ethics to the real world.⁹⁹ However, applied ethics seems to go further than just answering the question of what specific actions one should take in practical situations (the practical question). Applied ethics deals with the very question of whether some act is permissible or impermissible in and of itself.¹⁰⁰

To make this point clear, it should be noted that applied ethics is a field that separates into many sub-fields. To list just a few, we can separate applied ethics into business ethics (ethical theory regarding the field of the trade of good and services), bioethics (ethical theory regarding the biological issues such as medical practice or issues regarding beginning of life), and finally social ethics (ethical theory regarding notions such as liberty, property rights and the like).¹⁰¹ Arguably, each of these subfields may have distinct questions they might attempt to answer, and I do not think that Smyth has fully considered the scope and reach of applied ethics as a branch of philosophy, and thus he has not done enough to show us why every philosopher either *is* or *needs* to fall into his meta-ethical framework (because not all of them are trying to answer the practical question).

Given these separate subfields of applied ethics, I believe it becomes evident that answering the question of what an agent should do cannot possibly be the only question applied ethicists aim to (or should aim to) answer. Let us take the concept of bioethics here for example: is it enough for the applied ethicist to point out that doctors ought not to help a patient end their life via euthanasia? Surely there are further questions that arise in answering the question – those being; is euthanasia permissible? Under what normative outlook is euthanasia permissible? If it is

⁹⁸ Dittmer (2022)

⁹⁹ Dittmer (2022)

¹⁰⁰ Dittmer (2022)

¹⁰¹ Dittmer (2022)

permissible, to what degree is the doctor culpable for the death of a person (considering this person has decided on their own that they wish to end their own life)? Then the questions begin to break down even further. For instance, is it permissible for one to choose to end their own life? Under what normative framework is it permissible for one to end their own life? If it is not permissible, why do humans feel such a desperate need to help put someone who lives in constant pain out of their misery? Is the desire to help someone end their life when they are in constant pain *itself* a permissible desire? These questions surely touch on other branches of philosophy (such as meta-ethics) but the point nonetheless stands that in attempting to apply moral concepts to everyday life, further questions arise in the applied ethics field that make this application more complicated, but also that leads to the kind of applied ethics in which one is no longer attempting to answer the narrow question of what an agent should do.

In fact, applied ethics is so broad in its scope that even Smyth himself is to be considered an applied ethicist, as he is working in the field of procreation ethics, and I believe that he is not immune to his own criticisms under the concept of applied ethics that his meta-ethical framework relies on. After all, he does not seem to be telling agents what actions to take. If applied ethics is meant to answer both the practical and the authority question, then why has Smyth himself, in writing an applied ethics paper, not answered these questions? As Smyth points out, applied ethics ought to answer, ‘What should I do?’, and this answer should relate to the agent in a manner that accounts for their perspective. However, in his critique of procreative ethics, Smyth is answering more abstract questions, similar to the one he sets out as “Which types of actions will best promote valuable outcomes?” rather than the one any applied ethicist purportedly ought to be answering, namely, “What action should I take?”¹⁰² This also ties into his criticism of procreative ethicists writing in an impersonal mode, which is the same manner in which his paper is presented. Smyth seems to fall into the very faults he finds with these other procreative ethicists: something he himself ironically becomes simply by engaging in the procreative ethics debate.

I believe that procreative ethics is one of the subfields of applied ethics that does not attempt to directly answer the question of ‘What actions should I take?’. Rather, procreation ethicists are

¹⁰² Smyth (2020, 71)

embroiled in the question of the permissibility of bringing people into creation. Here I believe we can note that Smyth has made concession for the possibility that this could be the case for procreative ethicists stating that “if the task of procreative ethics is simply to register these facts, to note their existence on some cosmic ledger, then perhaps that task has been accomplished by the procreative ethicists I am discussing.”¹⁰³ So, to some degree, I believe that he has anticipated this form of argument. However, he further goes on to argue, using the work of Peter Singer as an exemplar of the kind of work applied ethicists do,¹⁰⁴ to state that *all* applied ethics *must* also set out to answer the practical question, and that if procreation ethicists are merely embroiled in some kind of theoretical engagement, then there does not seem to be any practical worth in their conclusions.

However, this argument only works if one buys into the sense of applied ethics that Smyth provides. For one thing, to make one applied ethicist an example for the manner in which every ethicist is meant to function, especially in a field as varied as applied ethics, is highly contentious. Applied ethicists do not all need to directly answer the question of ‘What actions should I take?’ in order for their work to be ‘applied’ in some manner. This is most evident with procreation ethicists, whose answers regarding the permissibility of procreation touch on numerous other subfields of ethics without needing to directly state that ‘these are the actions agents should take’ (consider here for instance bioethics, and how the permissibility of procreation can lead to further clarification of other ethical questions).

It seems rather strange that Smyth would then paint their answering more abstract questions (such as ‘What are the most valuable outcomes?’) as a kind of negative. The conclusions brought about by these procreative ethicists are meant to help some or other agent (whether that be a philosopher or some other applied ethicist) *to* answer the question of ‘What actions should an agent take?’ It does not seem odd to want to base the answer of what agents are meant to do on some kind of moral consideration that is meant to answer the question on what the best outcomes are. Answering the question of what the most valuable outcomes are serves to justify further answers on questions of what actions agents should take (and other questions that may further

¹⁰³ Smyth (2020, 79)

¹⁰⁴ Smyth (2020, 79)

arise from thereon). In this sense, it does not work to say that in addressing abstract questions that procreation ethics (or any other field in applied ethics that works to answer similar questions) are not useful or cannot be applied.

If my judgements regarding the scope of applied ethics are correct, then there seems to be major problems with Smyth's criticism. If applied ethicists are not all directly attempting to answer the question of what actions some agent should take, it makes no sense to then argue that their answers ought to all relate directly to the agent's practical perspective or justify why these considerations ought to hold some higher order authority. This is especially the case with procreation ethics, where to answer the question of what is permissible, an objective standpoint is necessary (as opposed to the negative that Smyth paints it as). The arguments made in favour of or against procreation do not need to relate to the agent's perspective; they are not attempting to answer which action he should take. Rather, they are attempting to provide justifications for the answers to the questions of what actions he should take. These arguments also do not need to present some higher order relevance to the agent, since their conclusions do not dictate his actions but rather, add to the log of considerations the agent may consider when faced with other considerations that dictate verdicts on what actions that agent should take. His arguments against Benatar, as well as the other procreation ethicists therefore come up short.

3.2. Defining what Adequately Answers the Questions

It also does not help Smyth's argument that despite his praise of Peter Singer, Singer seems to make use of the same kind of argumentation that Smyth criticises Benatar for. As Smyth points out, Benatar "is plainly working under rule-consequentialist assumptions,"¹⁰⁵ and Singer is well-known to adhere to the same Utilitarianism. Likewise, Singer's writing maintains the abstract third-personal writing mode that brings procreation ethicists' work into question. For instance, in *Animal Liberation*, Singer states that "no matter what the nature of the being, the principle of equality requires that its suffering be counted equally with the like suffering—insofar as rough

¹⁰⁵ Smyth (2020, 75)

comparisons can be made—of any other being.”¹⁰⁶ This tone of abstraction/third personal mode of discussion is maintained even in Singer’s aforementioned ([section 2.4](#)) call to action. Singer states that we should “take responsibility for our own lives, and make them as free of cruelty as we can. The first step is that we cease to eat animals.”¹⁰⁷

What is it that makes Singer’s work immune to the criticism of abstraction that is laid against procreation ethicists? Perhaps one might reaffirm Smyth’s point about Singer providing us not only with an answer to the practical question, but also how he has given us considerations that supposedly “millions of readers”¹⁰⁸ felt deeply resonated with their perspectives. However, what about these considerations make them any different to the facts pertaining to the suffering and harm not only caused *by* rampant procreation (as discussed by the other procreation ethicists in [section 2.3](#)) but also to those who come into existence? If facts regarding the suffering of animals presented in the same third-personal mode is enough to resonate with millions, how are we to take Smyth’s claim that facts regarding death and suffering regarding the lives of those who have not come into existence delivered in the same way is somehow problematic? Additionally, if these considerations were so compelling, why is it the case that, given the statistics *by OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2022-2031*,¹⁰⁹ even more millions still choose to eat meat, the amount of which is expected to reach an excess of 154 metric tons of *poultry alone* over the next ten years¹¹⁰ (starting from 2021)?

Furthermore, I believe that there are enough reasons to question the very claims that Smyth makes regarding the practical perspective of agents. I do not think Smyth does enough to show what it is in procreative ethics that runs so counter to an agent’s perspective that the conclusions would not be compelling enough. Here it would help to look at his argument regarding Elizabeth Brake.¹¹¹ Here once again, it seems that Smyth anticipates the argument that procreation ethicists are meant to help with justification in answering the question of what actions should be taken (as I have here presented). He argues that Brake, in presenting the argument that procreation comes

¹⁰⁶ Singer (1975, 38)

¹⁰⁷ Singer (1975, 237)

¹⁰⁸ Smyth (2020, 79)

¹⁰⁹ OECD/FAO (2022)

¹¹⁰ OECD/FAO (2022, 194)

¹¹¹ Smyth (2020, 78) referring to Brake

at the cost of great ecological problems, is presenting the kinds of issues that do not relate enough to an agent's perspective to be a compelling argument for why one should abstain from procreation. However, it seems rather dubious that an agent who would perhaps want to answer the question of 'What actions should I take?' justified by an answer to 'What are the most valuable outcomes?' would so callously disregard the drastic ecological effect that stems from procreation. One who is interested in the permissibility of procreation, and how that leads to the actions they would take, would likely hold the facts presented to a higher degree as a consideration.

Smyth seems to insist that an agent's perspective would be *coldly* distant from these facts. This is not only a broad assumption on what the perspective of agents are, since it assumes that all agents hold the same kinds of things to higher degrees and others to lesser, but it also paints a rather negative picture on the outlook prospective parents may have when considering if they will have children. Supposedly, they do not care about these facts, and according to Smyth, this is fine. I believe this is indicative of a deeper problem with Smyth's existential grounding which I will discuss in the next subsection.

The foregoing argument not only brings into question the adequacy of to what degree Singer has addressed the practical and authority questions, given the manner in which Smyth uses him as an example for the ideal applied ethicist, but it also brings into question the very adequacy of the criticism that Smyth lobbies at these procreation ethicists. If what Singer is doing is enough for Smyth, then Smyth needs to show why Singer's work is so different from procreation ethicists that it does not fall to the same scrutiny. If we are to write in a manner that more closely reflects the agent's perspective, then how has Singer done so in a manner that procreation ethicists have not given their abstract means of discussion? How does Singer's considerations which have both resonated and *not resonated* with millions differ from procreation ethicists? Finally, why are we to believe that the facts Singer presents are somehow of relevance to agents, when the facts regarding suffering brought on by procreation are so unimportant to agents (according to Smyth) seeking to procreate, especially when we consider that these facts are presented in the exact same manner? Smyth clearly needs to do more to show us what serves as an adequate response to both the practical and authority questions. If Singer's work has done enough, then we need to know

what is has done so differently from theorists like Benatar, who is for one, is telling us to stop procreating, and two, giving us reasons why.

3.3. The Problems with Smyth's existential grounding

Finally, I contend that there are major flaws in not only the existential grounding that Smyth advocates, but also the very philosophy that stems from this existential grounding concept. As earlier discussed in [section 2.5](#), what is existentially grounding for an agent is any sort of experience which they can cite as a justification for any kind of judgement when they reflect on their lives and determine if that life has been worthwhile/fulfilled.

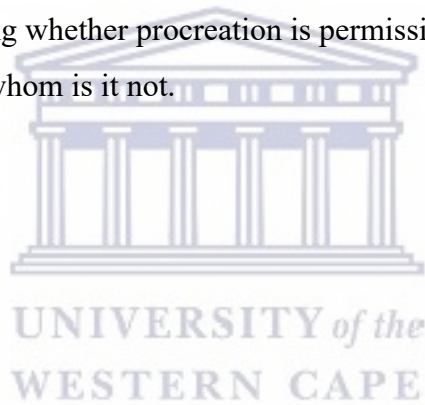
I believe that one of this concept's main issues lies in its highly relative justification for action. Supposedly, if one is to determine which actions would hold higher authority than others, it would be the kind of action that one would positively reflect on when one considers the question of having lived a fulfilled life. However, there are many different notions that can be brought into consideration when an agent considers whether they have lived a fulfilled life. What is fulfilling to one, could be harmful to others, and I therefore worry that this existential grounding allows for the justification of abhorrent actions, since to some, these actions would lead to the kind of fulfilled life that they would positively reflect on, but which may be severely harmful to others. These actions do not even need to be intentionally malevolent to lead to harmful outcomes for others yet are supposedly justified for those who perform these actions given the higher order quality of existential grounding. Smyth's concept is not only loose but highly subjective, and it is because of this subjective basis that existential grounding serves as a practical basis from which to justify actions that it becomes problematic.

It does not help to stave off these worries when we note that according to Smyth, existential grounding is meant to justify one's life to oneself, as opposed to justifying one's actions to others. Smyth goes on to argue that while people may consider existential grounding to be narcissistic, this is unavoidable due to the deeply personal nature of reflecting back on one's own life. This argument does not do enough to settle the issue of what is the problem with the

narcissistic (and considerably selfish) nature of existential grounding. Let us consider an example. Let us say that for some people, eating some kind of animal-based cuisine is existentially grounding. Perhaps animal-based cuisine reminds them of home or brings them the pleasure of nostalgia in the form of some other memory. So, to each person who partakes in such consumption, let us say that this is the case. This then leads to the production of meat which leads to the suffering of animals. These agents, in the face of existential grounding, supposedly then not finding the suffering of animals compelling enough to abstain from eating animal-based foods, ignore the further suffering of animals that this consumption leads to. It is true that one person's consumption of animal-based food may not have a large impact. However, wide scale consumption of animal-based food would then in fact lead to the wide scale suffering of animals which Singer presents, and which would now be supported by Smyth's 'existential grounding'. These agents can then reflect on their lives and decide their lives have been fulfilled by the actions they took, and yet ironically their actions would lead to the suffering of animals that Singer discusses in the very work Smyth uses as the ideal notion of applied ethics. In this way, existential grounding seems to support not only justification for harmful acts, but justification for acting in a selfish manner that does not account for the harms that even considerably less malevolent acts can cause.

Of course, as Smyth clearly points out, existential grounding is but only one of what could be considered many practical considerations, but if we are to find considerations that will help to hold some moral considerations in high regard these practical considerations cannot be problematic in and of themselves. These practical outlooks would only allow agents to reject moral judgements based on considerations that are flawed and are therefore prone to moral scrutiny as well. Thus, a new issue arises in the applied ethics field, in that we would need to begin to assess the permissibility and problems of practical considerations *like* existential grounding. This seems to lead to rather convoluted method of engaging in the applied ethics discussion, since practical considerations according to Smyth are vital in convincing agents to buy into moral considerations, but if these practical considerations are themselves morally problematic, the cycle continues into a strange (and seemingly endless) direction.

At the same time, Smyth's suggested philosophy seems undeniably flawed. Under his conception, moral considerations are meant to apply to agents in a manner that reflects their own personal view, and which therefore also would find some kind of higher authority. But, if we are to consider the case of his existential grounding, he seems to be saying that we need to gear our moral philosophy to agents in an absurdly specific and personal manner. The kind of moral philosophizing he is advocating is not only highly specific to agents in the sense that some might be completely left out of the equation by means of not appealing to their perspectives, but also highly subjective in that these considerations ought to appeal to agents in some emotive sense. I think the problems that stem from a subjective morality are self-evident, and while Smyth himself contends that moral philosophy needs to find some kind of balance between the personal and impersonal,¹¹² I believe the conclusion he is suggesting places nearly all of the weight onto the personal. This is what I believe is fundamentally problematic since it seems no longer will procreation ethicists be discussing whether procreation is permissible, but rather to *whom* is procreation permissible, and to whom is it not.



¹¹² Smyth (2020, 81)

4. The Foundation of Smyth's Critique

The foregoing sections have thus far brought Smyth's critique of anti-natalist literature and procreation ethics into question, but I believe more is to be done in order to truly show the flaws that lie at the heart of Smyth's fundamental critique. For this purpose, it is important that we get to the very bottom of where it is that his critique comes from. What is it that justifies this call for practicality and authority? To answer this, it would aid us greatly to look into the literature that he cites in order to form the basis of the 'practical question' as well as the 'authority problem'. Here we are to look at some of the work of the noteworthy philosophers that Smyth cites for the justification of his call for practicality and authority.

4.1 The Foundation of the Practical and Authority Problems

Each of the writers that Smyth cites, according to him, supposedly comes to the conclusion that the practical question, which Smyth argues ought to be a fundamentally important question to applied ethics, cannot be answered from an impersonal or outsider perspective, and that any moral theory attempting to answer that question needs to relate their answer more directly to the perspective of any would-be reader, such that should the reader find themselves in any particular predicament (especially the kind of predicament in which one might ask this particular question for), the philosopher's response will give clear directions and therefore will be of practical use.

Additionally, Smyth continues that Bernard Williams and Christine Korsgaard in particular stress that even if there is a response to this issue of practicality that fits the description for practical worth, then there still exists the issue of rational authority. This is the issue that even if rational agents may care about being moral, and moral considerations may cater more directly to their perspective, these moral considerations might not always be prioritised above other considerations. In other words, there seems to be a need for these moral considerations to show some kind of higher order authority, such that they are considered of higher priorities than other considerations.

We should not have to go too far to see evidence of the claims Smyth provides regarding both the practical question, as well as the question of rational authority. Korsgaard ironically seems to place these two issues the other way around, starting with a question almost akin to the rational authority question, then proceeding to the view regarding the practical question. In particular, Korsgaard in *The Sources of Normativity*,¹¹³ discusses how the practical or normative questions come about, stating that the “normative question is a first-person question that arises for the moral agent who must actually do what morality says.”¹¹⁴ She claims that the philosopher must place themselves into the shoes of the agent that the moral claim might speak to, and then ask ‘Why must I do this?’ (the normative question/ the question of rational authority). Whatever the philosopher’s response is to this question, is then the answer to the normative question.

From there, Korsgaard claims that for a response to the normative question to be successful, “the answer must actually succeed in addressing someone in that position. It must not merely specify what we might say, in the third person, about an agent who challenges or ignores the existence of moral claims.”¹¹⁵ Her explanation is that we must eliminate the possibility of an agent feeling some resistance to the moral claims. A good answer to the normative question should be one “that satisfies us when we ourselves ask the normative question.”¹¹⁶ Thereafter she simply doubles down on the rational authority question, claiming that because morality tends to ask an awful lot of people, sometimes going to the extent that someone may have to put their life on the line, the answer to the normative question should “show that sometimes doing the wrong thing is as bad or worse than death.”¹¹⁷

Bernard Williams on the other hand is somewhat more reluctant to too straightforwardly claim that moral philosophy that answers the practical question ought to appeal entirely to an insider perspective. He discusses the concept of the need for a more personal view to answer the question of what is to be done in the moral sense, claiming that morality that answers such a kind

¹¹³ Korsgaard (1996)

¹¹⁴ Korsgaard (1996, 16)

¹¹⁵ Korsgaard (1996, 16)

¹¹⁶ Korsgaard (1996, 17)

¹¹⁷ Korsgaard (1995, 17)

of question must *at the very least* hold some kind of insider perspective. Despite finding many issues therein, Williams seems to more favourably consider Aristotelian ethics, which grounds ethical frameworks “on considerations of well-being and of a life worth living.”¹¹⁸ He praises this form of ethical theorising for how it showed that there is good reason to be ethical in a manner that appealed to the first personal perspective (that is, with reasons that appeal directly to the agent).¹¹⁹ The issue he sees is that some may read this Aristotelian kind of ethics as egoistic (in the sense that they seem to make one focus on the self and the gratification of their own desires), since they’re meant to show each person that they have reason to live ethically by appealing to their own desires, but argues that there are reasons to stave off the concern that they may be considered wholly egoistic since they do not appeal directly to an agent’s desire for self-satisfaction. Aristotle’s aim (for instance) was not to show how an agent (and their desires) fit into an ethical life, but rather, it gives “an account of the self into which that life fits.”¹²⁰

Despite the potential for agent-centred theories (those that appeal directly to the agent’s perspective) to fall into egoistic territory (such as the Aristotelian kind), Williams outwardly rejects that we should attempt to answer ethical questions of what is to be done from an outside perspective, since by attempting to do so, one “cannot get an adequate picture of the value of anything, including his own dispositions.”¹²¹ In other words, one may lose sight of the value of things that ought to be considered valuable. At the same time, Williams rather early on presents the issue that even if we can provide justification to an agent who may ask why they should be moral (say by appealing to their personal perspective), there still exists a need to present an ethical framework that also answers *why* an agent should hold moral/ethical actions to a higher standard¹²²(the authority question), which is what seems to lead to him speaking more highly of the Aristotelian ‘insider perspective’ form of ethical considerations, for their ability to appeal to people’s desires (which they will likely hold in higher regard to other considerations) to live/have a good life more directly.¹²³

¹¹⁸ Williams (1985, 34)

¹¹⁹ Williams (1985, 32)

¹²⁰ Williams (1985, 32)

¹²¹ Williams (1985, 51)

¹²² Williams (1985, 22)

¹²³ Williams (1985, 32)

The philosopher most concerned about this need for both an insider and outsider perspective regarding moral considerations is Thomas Nagel. In his *The View from Nowhere*,¹²⁴ Nagel seeks to find a solution to the problem of how the “perspective of a particular person inside the world with an objective view of that same world, the person and his viewpoint included”¹²⁵ can either combine or come apart. He believes that seeking a view that fully accounts for both an insider and outsider perspective will lead to “false reductions or to the refusal to recognize part of what is real.”¹²⁶ Nonetheless, Nagel claims that it is important to maintain some kind of connection between the insider and outsider perspective, such that there are times where one ought to rely more on one than the other. He argues that, for instance, seeing things like practical reasons for actions, and how they relate to ourselves or others from an objective standpoint, we may see some new perspectives on our reasons and values such that we “arrive at a new conception which may endorse some of the original reasons”¹²⁷ or reject false reasons or values to make way for new ones that might be more real. In other words, there can be some place for some impersonal perspective, but it should not entirely take the place of the personal and should more likely bring better accuracy to our understanding of our practical reasons. Nagel is just as much interested in the normativity of perspectives, and thus his aims are to establish to what degree insider and outsider perspectives can collaborate and separate, such as to give us an accurate concept of what provides our actions with normative reasons.

Thus, we see the formation of the practicality and authority problems that Smyth discusses arising out of a desire to establish the most accurate/truthful kind of moral philosophy. A kind of philosophy which relates to agents in a manner that would appeal to their perspectives for the sake of their acting moral in a manner that they do not find themselves resisting the claims of moral judgements. We thus begin to see the foundation from which Smyth develops his practical and authority question.

¹²⁴ Nagel (1989)

¹²⁵ Nagel (1989, 2)

¹²⁶ Nagel (1989, 3 - 4)

¹²⁷ Nagel (1989, 140)

4.2 An Internalist Critique?

In citing these aforementioned philosophers, and the conclusions found with regards to the insider/outsider perspective, and how ethics ought to relate to those perspectives, we see that Smyth has indeed captured a real worry regarding the way moral philosophy addresses the practical question. There is, however, another point that stands out among these philosophers; many of them are considered *internalists*. It is in knowing this that we can see where Smyth's call for practicality and normativity stems from. Internalists (more specifically in the case of these philosophers, 'motivational judgement internalists') believe that moral judgments are internally motivating (they are motivating in and of themselves). Korsgaard clearly states that she and many of the philosophers she discusses in *The Sources of Normativity*, (including Williams and Nagel) consider themselves to be internalists who "believe that moral considerations necessarily have some power to motivate us."¹²⁸ She further explains that, "Internalists believe that when a person has a duty, say, or knows that she has, she *ipso facto* has a motive for doing that duty."¹²⁹

So how does the internalist doctrine relate to Smyth's critique? It's clear that internalists believe that if one espouses moral judgements (which are, according to internalists, themselves internally motivating), then one ought to provide an adequate response to both the practical question (what should I do?) and (especially) the authority question (why should I be moral?). In particular, answering the latter question would give a higher order value to these judgements, which would address the requirements these internalists place on adequate moral judgements. In order for moral judgments to show this higher order value, many of these philosophers (the internalists under discussion) believe that these judgments ought to speak directly to the agent, in a manner that relates closely enough to their perspective that they do not find themselves at odds with or resistant to these moral judgements. If one is to provide some meta-ethical framework that sets the limits and rules on what is morally right or wrong, the judgements espoused by this framework ought to hold significant normative weight; that is *if* the theory of internalism is at the

¹²⁸ Korsgaard (1996, 81)

¹²⁹ Korsgaard (1996, 81)

very least correct. This seems to be what inspires the “meta-ethical orientation”¹³⁰ that Smyth makes use of, in which “any moral philosopher who supplies us with moral verdicts must provide a substantive solution to the practicality and authority problems.”¹³¹

However, internalism cannot be taken for granted and is a contested thesis. Internalists have what can almost be considered a philosophical arch-nemesis: externalism (or, once again, more specifically, ‘motivational judgement externalism’), which is the thesis that any connection between moral judgement and motivation to act is purely contingent.¹³² Thus, given Smyth’s internalist position, and how it informs his criticism, in the next section, we will consider the wider internalist/externalist debate, to see whether internalism justifies Smyth’s call for a major shift in moral philosophy. We will do so by taking a deeper look at the internalist/externalist debate, discussing the perspectives of both sides and exploring a problem that lies at the core of the debate: the amoralist. In this manner, I believe we can truly root out the plausibility not only of internalism itself, but the very foundation of Smyth’s critique.

It is not enough, however, to simply assume the connection between Smyth and these theorists should lead us to the conclusion that Smyth is necessarily an internalist himself. However, it is hard to deny that internalism seems to underlie the very nature of Smyth’s critique. After all, internalism (and the arguments to take up the position) is what drives much of the arguments that Smyth relies on to establish his meta-ethical orientation. As previously stated, these theorists are explicitly internalists, and the arguments they provide for the manner in which we answer questions of normativity stem clearly from the internalist position. Korsgaard states that, when discussing the question of normativity, she operates under two assumptions: “first, that internalism in this general sense [that moral judgements motivate internally] is correct, and second, that internalism in this general sense does not exhaust the question of normativity.”¹³³ She then states that once “we see what the motives morality provides us with are — how moral ideas are able to motivate us in a given case — we can still ask whether we endorse those

¹³⁰ Smyth (2020, 3)

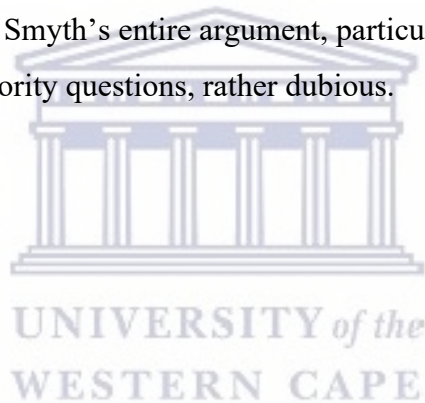
¹³¹ Smyth (2020, 3)

¹³² Rosati (2016)

¹³³ Korsgaard (1996, 81)

motives.”¹³⁴ This helps give insight as to what it is that drives the fundamental nature of Smyth’s *own* critique.

I think it also helps to note that Benatar, in his later paper responding to Smyth, also seems to take Smyth to be an internalist, who is interested in providing a kind of philosophy that appeals directly to agents and gives them reasons to accept moral judgements such that these judgements become internally motivating.¹³⁵ We can liken this to Smyth’s external grounding, which seems to motivate actions on an agent’s internal desires. I believe we can reasonably conclude from the foregoing discussion is that even if Smyth *does not* hold onto internalism as strongly as the theorists he cites, he does seem to advocate for a moral philosophy that presents judgements that are meant to motivate in some kind of internal manner, and that the fundamental basis of his critique *does* rely on internalism, and if this fundamental nature is proven to be implausible, it gives us great reason to consider Smyth’s entire argument, particularly his strong call for answers to the practical and authority questions, rather dubious.



¹³⁴ Korsgaard (1996, 81)

¹³⁵ Benatar (2022, 136)

5. The Plausibility of Internalism

In [section 3](#), I have espoused many of the reasons I believe Smyth's criticism ultimately fails. This was meant to show the manner in which Smyth's arguments are flawed in and of themselves. However, here it is important to note that all our discussion has so far, that being both the merits and possible issues regarding Smyth's presented views, been written under the assumption that internalism is correct.

At the very least, we have so far discussed Smyth's work to a degree that we have not yet challenged the very foundation from which his criticism stems. The arguments being made in favour for calling on some kind of need to address the practical and authority questions stem from the fundamental internalist belief that moral judgements are internally motivating. These issues would not hold the weight they do if the theory of internalism were to get things wrong – since these judgements would no longer hold the normative sway that internalists believe they have, and moral judgements would no longer need to strictly follow the stringent layout that Korsgaard and the like set out with their need for a practically and normatively authoritative morality. Thus, in following Smyth's lead of going beyond the details of the Asymmetry Argument, and instead critiquing Benatar at a fundamental basis, so too shall we go on to critique the fundamental basis of Smyth's position.

So, what exactly can be said to address these issues, or at the very least, what can be said that shows that we ought to be suspect of internalism to at least enough of a degree that it presents a problem for Smyth? As mentioned in the preceding [section](#), internalism does not stand uncontested. It has a philosophical rival in externalism. Considering that this opposing view exists could be enough to call into question the swaying power of the internalist concept. There is indeed a vast literature on the discourse between internalism and externalism. Even without extending quite so far, we can perhaps even simply point to some agent's potential intuitive questioning of the claim that moral judgements hold motivational sway in and of themselves. After all, some of us have likely run into a situation in which we were faced with a moral judgement (which we felt was the right thing to do in a given case) and yet were still not moved

by this judgement. In the following sections, I examine some further reasons to doubt the truth of internalism.

5.1 The internalist/externalist debate

In section [three](#), we initially presented externalism's claim as being that any connection between moral judgement and motivation to act is purely contingent. In other words, they do not ascribe to the belief that moral judgements motivate necessarily. Externalists argue that one is motivated by moral considerations when this moral judgement combines with a desire, where the judgement is connected to desire in a manner that rationalises action.¹³⁶ The internalist response to the externalist outlook is that it will not adequately explain moral motivation; after all, with the internalist outlook, when one makes a moral judgement, they are necessarily motivated by that judgement. There is no need for further clarification on where the justification for some morally motivated action may come from. The externalist would then need to provide a more complete and adequate explanation of moral motivation.¹³⁷

In *The Moral Problem*,¹³⁸ Michael Smith (an internalist) presents such a challenge to the externalist view. He begins by noting that, when one's moral judgement changes, one's moral motivation commonly follows suit. He questions "how are we to explain the reliability of this connection between judgement and motivation"¹³⁹ that we all must accept as a matter of basic observation? He believes that internalism can solve this problem, and that the only way externalists will be able to address this issue is to say that "the reliable connection between judgement and motivation is to be explained externally,"¹⁴⁰ in other words by appealing to the person's desire to act (their "motivational disposition")¹⁴¹ morally. Smith believes that there are problems with this outlook. As aforementioned, the internalist doctrine can conclude safely that when an agent makes a moral judgement, they are intrinsically motivated by that judgement, and

¹³⁶ Rosati (2016)

¹³⁷ Rosati (2016)

¹³⁸ Smith (1994)

¹³⁹ Smith (1994, 72)

¹⁴⁰ Smith (1994, 72)

¹⁴¹ Smith (1994, 72)

when they change that moral judgement, there is therefore a change in their moral motivation as well.¹⁴² On the other hand, externalists would need to say that an agent is motivated to do what they believe is right due to their motivational disposition as a good person, but then we would need an explanation of what that disposition is.¹⁴³ According to Smith, the only disposition that can explain the connection between judgement and motivation under this externalist concept is by appealing to an agents disposition to *do the right thing*, which Smith considers to be a “reductio”.¹⁴⁴

Smith believes that this externalist outlook treats moral motivation in a derivative sense, in that moral motivation under this conception derives from the desire to do the right thing combined with their judgement about what the right thing is to do. Under such a conception, an agent could desire to aid another not because they judge it right to help others; but simply because they desire to do what is right and that *happens* to be helping others. His argument is that this is an implausible manner of treating moral motivation, since “commonsense tells us that if good people judge it right to be honest... then they care non-derivatively about these things.”¹⁴⁵ The picture of how moral judgements and motivation connects seems to disconnect the agent from the purpose of being moral altogether, since their motivation lies in a derivative desire to just do the right thing, whatever that right thing may be.¹⁴⁶

It is important here to note that (Michael) Smith’s position is not quite unlike (Nicholas) Smyth’s concern in seeking a response to the questions of practicality and authority. This concern being: moral philosophers (in particular, applied ethicists) ought to provide meaningful justifications for why their moral judgements ought to hold a higher order value than some other consideration. Both Smyth and Smith’s views stem from the desire to address the normative power of moral judgements, and as we see, Smyth presents the argument that philosophers ought to provide perspective adhering considerations with significant authority over other considerations, such as

¹⁴² Smith (1994, 72)

¹⁴³ Smith (1994, 73)

¹⁴⁴ Smith (1994, 75)

¹⁴⁵ Smith (1994, 75)

¹⁴⁶ Smith (1994, 76)

the problematic existential grounding, as a potential solution to his normative concerns. Smith, on the other hand, advocates more for the internalism doctrine itself.

On this comparison, one might here consider the possibility that Smyth seems to be advocating for something that seems close to the externalist doctrine, where moral judgements might not be motivating enough in and of themselves, and therefore need some kind of catalyst to motivate agents. However, I believe this reading would be a mistake since, similarly to what Benatar notes¹⁴⁷, it would seem that Smyth's call for philosophers to provide answers to the practical and authority questions is to provide agents with reasons to buy into moral judgements in an internally motivating sense, in the same manner that existential grounding seems to motivate agents in a sense that appeals to their desires. This might sound familiar since it mirrors the kind of considerations put forward by the theorists he cites (particularly such as those provided by Williams), and therefore it seems unlikely that he is advocating for some kind of externalist conclusion.

Smith's rejection of externalism has been the object of much critique.¹⁴⁸ Some have argued that the fact that a good person is motivated to do what they think is right does not mean that they cannot also be motivated non-derivatively by concern for the welfare of others. Others have pointed out that there are other explanations for the reliable connection between moral judgements and motivation; for instance, an agent could just desire to do what they believe is right, as opposed to doing the right thing *whatever it happens to be*.¹⁴⁹ Sigrun Svavarsdottir¹⁵⁰ in 'Moral Cognitivism and Motivation' argues that under the externalist view, a person being motivated by doing what is morally valuable or required does not mean that said agent is only interested in doing what she believes is right or doing whatever the right thing is (in the sense that Smith presents). Rather, it is compatible with the externalist view that an agent would immediately respond to the need of another, and an externalist view that conceives of a good person that is motivated by the desire *to be moral* does not prevent them from seeing the importance that lies at the core of morality. Instead, when the agent forms the moral judgement,

¹⁴⁷ Benatar (2022, 136)

¹⁴⁸ Rosati (2016)

¹⁴⁹ Rosati (2016)

¹⁵⁰ Svavarsdottir (1999)

the *desire to be moral* plays a role in the shift from judging that it is right to perform a certain action, and then desiring to perform that certain action.¹⁵¹

What is important to note from the foregoing discussion is that externalists are interested in the mental function that transpires when one goes from judging it right to perform some action to desiring or being motivated to do that action. They make provision for the case that this mental function will not occur in every agent, since many will judge that a certain action is right without necessarily being motivated or ever coming to the desire to perform that action.¹⁵² From the foregoing discussion nonetheless, we see that a rather contentious battle of theories and application is heavily at play in the internalist/externalist literature, and while it may help to delve even deeper into the literature, an exposition of the vast array of issues that lie within the externalist and internalist view is not the aim here. Rather, we are looking at these accounts to see just what this debate may tell us about the success of Smyth's application of the internalist doctrine as a critique of Benatar's anti-natalism.

What we can see so far is that Smyth needs to do a lot more to show us what it is that makes his demand for practicality and authority justifiable in the face of the externalist doctrine, in which moral judgements and motivations do not come together as succinctly as Smyth presumes them to. I believe this shows that externalism stands as a major problem for Smyth's view, such that Smyth needs to do more work to show us what makes his meta-ethical basis viable to justify his strong call for answers to the practical and authority questions, as well as his proposed shift in the nature of moral philosophy.

In the following sections, I plan to show that, even if Smyth were to find some manner to overcome the challenge that his critique faces in the form of externalism, internalism on its own does not seem to be a viable position to maintain. Rather, the evidence suggests that internalism is in fact implausible.

¹⁵¹ Rosati (2016)

¹⁵² Rosati (2016)

5.2 *The Amoralist problem*

Our discussion into whether Smyth can get away with simply presuming the internalist doctrine does not need to stop there. Rather, I believe we can turn to a philosophical character that presents serious issue for the internalist doctrine. An issue that internalists have thus far not adequately dealt with. This character is the aforementioned amoralist.

The *amoralist* is a being who makes moral judgements but is not at all motivated by them.¹⁵³ Much of the discourse surrounding internalism and externalism involves dealing with this particular philosophical character. Many believe (particularly among internalists) that amoralists do not exist or rather, that they are conceptually impossible. Others believe that amoralists are an existing practical issue that needs to be addressed. The amoralist is a major problem for the internalist doctrine since it directly challenges their main claim about moral judgements being motivating in and of themselves. Given the devastating nature of the amoralist to internalism, it might help here to delve a little deeper into this issue. For this purpose, I want to make a note that there is a deeper connection between Michael Smith and Nicholas Smyth than simply their ascribing to the internalist doctrine. It seems to be the case that Smith has a very similar issue with the connection between moral judgements and the normative force they have over us, as Smyth does.

At the onset of *The Moral Problem*, Smith claims that “the objectivity of moral judgement suggests that there are moral facts, wholly determined by circumstances, and that our moral judgements express our beliefs about what these facts are.”¹⁵⁴ However, this “leaves it entirely mysterious how or why having a moral view is supposed to have special links with what we are motivated to do.”¹⁵⁵ At the same time, the practicality of moral judgements (the idea that having a moral opinion is to find ourselves with a corresponding motivation to act)¹⁵⁶ suggests that our moral judgements express our desires, and while this may give a better idea of the connection between our moral views and our motivation to act, “it leaves it entirely mysterious what a moral

¹⁵³ Rosati (2016)

¹⁵⁴ Smith (1994, 11)

¹⁵⁵ Smith (1994, 11)

¹⁵⁶ Smith (1994, 9 – 10)

argument is supposed to be an argument about; the sense in which morality is supposed to be objective.”¹⁵⁷ This issue is what lies at the very heart of his project, and is the very ‘moral problem’ he seeks to solve. So, how do we solve this issue of moral judgements and their connection to motivation? What gives these objective moral judgements normative power over us?

The response that is especially pertinent to our discussion is that of David Brink, who in ‘Externalist Moral Realism’¹⁵⁸ presents the major issue that the amoralist presents for the internalists. Brink argues that internalism is “false to the psychological facts.”¹⁵⁹ He insists that there are sociopaths who do not care about moral considerations,¹⁶⁰ and even if it were the case that everyone were motivated by moral considerations, it is still regarded as possible to ask for a justification for this concern.¹⁶¹ This comes with the scepticism that some might hold towards the acceptance that moral facts *do* exist, and why we should care about them. The amoralist concept is a method of presenting this kind of scepticism.¹⁶²

Brink presents that it only makes sense for the internalists to therefore disregard the amoralist as a conceptual impossibility, given that it is incoherent with their thesis. But this comes with a problem: it means the internalist does not take the amoralist challenge seriously enough.¹⁶³ While it is normally insisted on by internalists that the amoralist is a conceptual impossibility, the bulk of internalist responses to this issue, including Smith’s, who particularly challenges the amoralist in a direct response to Brink’s paper,¹⁶⁴ is to identify characteristics in moral judgements which makes it so that no rational agent could competently make moral judgements and not be motivated by them.¹⁶⁵ Internalists also make concessions for cases where moral motivation can be weakened, such as when an agent may make a moral judgment but not be adequately moved by them due to some factor (such as depression).¹⁶⁶ Though they insist that in

¹⁵⁷ Smith (1994, 10)

¹⁵⁸ Brink (1986)

¹⁵⁹ Brink (1986, 29)

¹⁶⁰ Brink (1986, 29)

¹⁶¹ Brink (1986, 30)

¹⁶² Brink (1986, 30)

¹⁶³ Brink (1986, 8)

¹⁶⁴ Smith (1994, 66 – 71)

¹⁶⁵ Rosati (2016)

¹⁶⁶ Rosati (2016)

cases where one appears to be making moral judgements but is not motivated by them, the agent must be either incompetent or speaking insincerely.¹⁶⁷ As Brink defines it, these agents are using moral terms in an “inverted commas” sense.¹⁶⁸ If they are insincere, they are only pretending to make moral judgements.¹⁶⁹

I believe that Brink is right in claiming that internalists do not take the amoralist challenge seriously. It is rather easy, beyond their suggested problems, to simply reject the existence of amoralists. Given the externalist view, it is unsurprising that they do not consider the amoralist in this same regard; they, in fact, believe that individuals can sincerely and with full competency make moral judgements without being motivated by them in any way.¹⁷⁰ This is of course in line with the externalist outlook. Brink himself advocates that externalism’s connection between moral judgements and motivation seems more plausible, especially given that it “allows us to take amoralism and the amoralist challenge seriously.”¹⁷¹ As aforementioned, internalists insist that the amoralist is a ‘conceptual impossibility’. We can even go so far as to say that both Smith (who relies on internalism to solve his concern regarding the connection between moral judgements and motivation) and Smyth (whose concerns are not only similar to Smith’s, but who also relies on the internalist doctrine to make his arguments work) *need* to insist this point, given that the existence of the amoralist ultimately foils the internalist outlook. So, what if it could be proven that not only is the amoralist indeed conceptually possible, but also that they are an actual reality?

5.3 The Amoralist manifest

Here we can turn to the work of Shaun Nichols.¹⁷² In a challenge to the arguments that moral judgements derive from our rational capacity, Shaun Nichols sets out to show how psychopaths – who he contends are real life amoralists – serve as a problem for theories that base their morality

¹⁶⁷ Rosati (2016)

¹⁶⁸ Brink (1986, 30)

¹⁶⁹ Rosati (2016)

¹⁷⁰ Rosati (2016)

¹⁷¹ Brink (1986, 31)

¹⁷² Nichols (2002)

on this unified notion of rationality.¹⁷³ He argues that there are two kinds of claims available to those who base morality in rationality:

- a.) a conceptual claim: it is part of our common understanding of morality that moral requirements are requirements of reason.
- b.) an empirical claim: it is an empirical fact about human psychology that moral judgment derives from our rational capacities.¹⁷⁴

He derives his notion of conceptual rationalism (the conceptual claim, in other words) from Michael Smith, and notes that Smith insists that conceptual rationalism entails the need for the “practicality requirement.”¹⁷⁵ He argues that it is therefore the case that “Conceptual Rationalism is committed to the claim that it’s a conceptual truth that people who make moral judgments are motivated by them.”¹⁷⁶ To be clear; Nichols is here discussing *internalism*. His argument is then that psychopaths pose a problem for conceptual rationalism because it is possible that they can be fully rational and make moral judgements without being motivated by them.¹⁷⁷

Nichols then cites many of the internalist responses that I have presented above (particularly, Smith’s argument that these amoralists do not actually make sincere moral judgments). He contends, however, that if “the inverted-commas response is to insulate Conceptual Rationalism from the rational amoralist, then the claim cannot be that it is an empirical fact about psychopaths that they use moral terms in an inverted-commas sense.”¹⁷⁸ He argues that conceptual rationalism is, according to Smith, meant to “characterise our ordinary moral concepts and intuitions,”¹⁷⁹ and therefore conceptual rationalists can only argue that it is part of our *understanding* of moral judgement that psychopaths do not use moral terms in a sincere manner (or rather, they use them in an inverted commas sense).¹⁸⁰

¹⁷³ Nichols (2002, 285)

¹⁷⁴ Nichols (2002, 285 – 286)

¹⁷⁵ Nichols (2002, 287)

¹⁷⁶ Nichols (2002, 287)

¹⁷⁷ Nichols (2002, 287)

¹⁷⁸ Nichols (2002, 288)

¹⁷⁹ Nichols (2002, 288)

¹⁸⁰ Nichols (2002, 288)

In order to solve this problem for the conceptual rationalist, it ought to be asked: what do people think about moral judgements in psychopaths? Nichols then presents the results of a study done in which questions regarding psychopathy and moral judgments were presented to a group of laymen to uncover how our moral concepts really work. What he found was that many laypeople thought that psychopaths really do understand the differences between right and wrong, and yet are unbothered to do what is morally right.¹⁸¹ Nichols concludes that “it seems to be a platitude that psychopaths really make moral judgments. And if it's a platitude that psychopaths really make moral judgments, it will be difficult to prove that Conceptual Rationalism captures the folk platitudes surrounding moral judgment.”¹⁸² In other words, conceptual rationalism, as it is established by Smith, does not accurately capture our conceptions of moral judgements and motivation.

Given the evidence, internalists cannot push the argument that the amoralist is a non-possibility, since, to at least some degree, amoralists do exist, such as psychopaths who *do* seem to make moral judgements without being motivated by them. This calls into question the strength of their core argument since they now cannot also conclusively state that moral judgements are motivating in and of themselves. This is a major problem for Smyth's critique, who needs internalism to do enough convincing to sell his points that moral philosophy needs to address the question of practicality and authority.

There are many ways to challenge anti-natalism. One could follow in the footsteps of those who we discussed in [section 2.1](#), or one could find some new fundamental basis from which to critique the anti-natalist view. One may even challenge the thesis with a simple question, like the previously noted issue in [section 2.5](#), ‘If anti-natalism is true, then why do so many people still have children?’ Previously, I argued that one potential solution might be the power of practical considerations. However, there is another possible response, which is to consider that perhaps, despite the potentially correct judgement that ‘procreating is impermissible’, it is entirely possible for one to form a moral judgement (even a correct moral judgement) and still be entirely unmoved by it, as externalists have claimed. This flies in the face of the internalist doctrine

¹⁸¹ Nichols (2002, 289)

¹⁸² Nichols (2002, 289)

Smyth needs to make this point more compelling. In the face of the of the foregoing argument, it would seem that internalism simply does not work, and therefore Smyth's criticism does not do enough to counter the anti-natalist thesis.



Conclusion

In this project, I have presented Benatar's anti-natalist thesis, including the arguments he presents for his thesis ([section 1](#)). I have also presented similar asymmetries of fellow anti-natalists Shiffrin and Fehige ([section 1.3](#)). I have examined several critiques of Benatar's anti-natalist thesis, including the works of Harman, Oberg, Smuts, Metz ([section 2.1](#)) and finally, Smyth, whose critique presented a new manner of addressing the anti-natalist thesis ([section 2.2](#)). Benatar's work has reached far and wide, and thus far all responses to his anti-natalist thesis have been considered inadequate. Given the importance of the discussion of procreation, a new fundamental challenge brings an interesting twist to the discourse.

Smyth, in challenging Benatar as well as procreation ethics itself at a fundamental basis, had all the makings of an interesting and complex new criticism which did not seem to make the mistakes that others did. Not only was this work meant to address the anti-natalist problem: Smyth had wanted to introduce a shift in moral philosophy that would lead to the addressing of the questions of practicality and authority. A kind of moral philosophy which was geared towards agents which would tell them exactly what to do, *and why*.

Unfortunately, despite his citing the work of Korsgaard, Williams and Nagel ([section 4](#)), the critique has fallen short. Not only does Smyth seem to mischaracterise the purpose of applied ethics, but he also does not provide a good conception of what meets his criteria for an adequate response to the practical and authority questions. Additionally, his existential grounding, while attempting to serve as a justification for moral action, seems to devolve into subjectivism, and allows for abhorrent acts, even when those acts are not intentionally malevolent.

Finally, given the theorists that Smyth cites, and his subsequent reliance on internalism to make many of his arguments work, the implausibility of internalism ([section 5](#)) shows that there is much more work to be done for Smyth's critique to not only effectively shut down the anti-natalist thesis, but also to justify this call for a major shift in moral philosophy. This project concludes that Smyth has not yet offered a convincing objection to the anti-natalism of Benatar and others.



UNIVERSITY *of the*
WESTERN CAPE

References

- Benatar, D. (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benatar, D. (2012). 'Every Conceivable Harm: A Further Defence of Anti-Natalism'. *South African Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 31(1), pp. 128–164.
- Benatar, D. (2013). 'Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics', *The Journal of Ethics*, Vol. 17, pp. 121 – 151.
- Benatar, D. (2017). *The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide to Life's Biggest Questions*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Benatar, D. (2022). 'Misconceived: Why These Further Criticisms of Anti-natalism Fail', *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 56, No. 1, pp. 119 - 151.
- Benatar, D., & Wasserman, D. (2015). *Debating Procreation*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brink, D. (1986). 'Externalist Moral Realism', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 24, pp. 23 – 41.
- Dittmer, J. (2022). 'Applied Ethics', *IEP*, <https://iep.utm.edu/applied-ethics/> Date of access: 21 August 2022
- Fehige, C. (1998) 'A Pareto Principle for Possible People', in Fehige, Christoph, and Wessels Ulla, eds. *Preferences*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, pp. 508 – 543.
- Finlay, S., & Shroeder, M. (2017). "Reasons for Action: Internal vs. External", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta. (Ed).

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reasons-internal-external/> Date of access: 1 February 2022

Hamisi, S. H. (2019). 'The Negative Consequences of Rapid Population Growth', *Global Scientific Journals*, Vol. 7, pp. 21 – 33.

Harman, E. (2009). 'Critical Study; David Benatar, *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence*', *NOUS*, < <https://www.princeton.edu/~eharman/Benatar.pdf>> Date of access: 1 February 2022 pp. 776 - 785.

Howard, A. (2022) 'The Climate Crisis: Why Population Matters', *Population Matters*, <https://populationmatters.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Population%20Matters%20Climate%20Change%20Briefing%20-%20July%202022.pdf>. Date of access: 21 August 2022

Korsgaard, C. M. (1996). *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Magnusson, E. (2019). 'How to reject Benatar's asymmetry argument', *Bioethics*, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/How-to-reject-Benatar%27s-asymmetry-argument.-Magnusson/bc4d2b1daf335e634e1f2ed6bf0ab1afde12276e> date of access: 1 February 2022 pp. 1 – 10.

Metz, T. (2011). 'Are Lives Worth Creating?', *Philosophical Papers*, Vol.40 (2), pp. 233–255.

Nagel, T. (1985). *The View From Nowhere*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Nichols, S. (2002). 'How Psychopaths Threaten Moral Rationalism: Is it Irrational to Be Amoral?', *The Monist*, Vol. 85, No. 2, pp. 285 – 303.

Oberg, A. (2019). 'Asymmetry, Suffering, and Coping: Running Alongside Benatar'. *Journal of Philosophy of Life*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 1 - 21.

- Obi, E. (2020). 'Effects of High Fertility on Economic Development'. *American Economic Association* <https://www.aeaweb.org/conference/2020/preliminary/paper/K8t4sifZ> Date of access: 1 February 2022
- OECD/FAO (2022). *OECD-FAO Agricultural Outlook 2022-2031*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/f1b0b29c-en>. Date of access: 7 November 2022
- Patches, M. (2014). 'Ask a Philosopher: What's Up With True Detective's Rust Cohle?'. *Vulture*. <https://www.vulture.com/2014/02/philosopher-assesses-true-detective-characters-rust-cohle-marty-hart.html> Date of access: 1 February 2022
- Shiffrin, S. (1999). 'Wrongful Life, Procreative Responsibility, and the Significance of Harm', *Legal Theory*, pp. 117 – 148.
- Smith, M. (1994). *The Moral Problem*, Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Smuts, A. (2014). 'To Be or Never to Have Been: Anti-Natalism and a Life Worth Living', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 17, No. 4, pp. 711 – 729.
- Smyth, N. (2020). 'What is the Question to which Anti-Natalism Is The Answer?', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 71 – 87.
- Smyth, N. (2022). 'Nothing Personal: On the Limits of the Impersonal Temperament in Ethics', *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, Vol. 56, No. 1, pp. 67 - 88.
- UCT Philosophy. (2021). 'Department of Philosophy', *University of Cape Town*, <http://www.philosophy.uct.ac.za/philosophy/staff/benatar/selectedbooks/betternevertohavebeen> Date of access: 1 February 2022
- Williams, B. (1985). *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.