7
Conclusion

So I have praised the dead that are already dead more than the living that are yet alive; but better than both of them is he who has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:2–4

There was a young man of Cape Horn
Who wished that he had never been born;
And he wouldn't have been
If his father had seen
That the tip of the rubber was torn.

Unknown[1]

[1] I am grateful to Tony Holiday for first drawing this limerick to my attention. Arthur Deex, expert on limericks, kindly gave me some of the history of this one. The version here is evidently a naughty spoof, by an unknown author, of Edward Lear's original:

> There was an Old Man of Cape Horn,
> Who wished he had never been born;
> So he sat on a chair
> Till he died of despair
> That dolorous Man of Cape Horn.

(Jackson, Holbrook, (ed.) *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear* (London: Faber & Faber, 1948) 51.) For other variants see Legman, G. *The Limerick: 1700 Examples with Notes, Variants and Index* (New York: Bell Publishing Company, 1969) 188, 425.

COUNTERING THE COUNTER-INTUITIVENESS OBJECTION

The view that coming into existence is always a harm runs counter to most people's intuitions. They think that this view simply cannot be right. Its implications, discussed in Chapters 4 to 6, do not fare any better in the court of common intuitions. The idea that people should not have babies, that there is a presumption in favour of abortion (at least in the earlier stages of gestation), and that it would be best if there were no more conscious life on the planet is likely to be dismissed as ridiculous. Indeed, some people are likely to find these views deeply offensive.

A number of philosophers have rejected other views because they imply that it would be better not to bring new people into existence. We already saw, in the previous chapter, that a number of thinkers reject the maximin principle because it implies that there should be no more people. There are other examples, however. Peter Singer rejects a 'moral ledger' view of utilitarianism, whereby the creation of an unsatisfied preference is a kind of 'debit' that is cancelled only when that preference is satisfied. He says that his view must be rejected because it entails that it would be wrong 'to bring into existence a child who will on the whole be very happy, and will be able to satisfy nearly all her preferences, but will still have some preferences unsatisfied'.[2] Nils Holtug rejects frustrationism[3]—the view that while the frustration of preferences has negative value, the satisfaction of preferences simply avoids negative value and contributes nothing positive. Frustrationism implies that we harm people by bringing them into existence if they will have frustrated desires (which everybody

[2] Singer, Peter, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 129.

[3] This view, also known as anti-frustrationism, was discussed in the penultimate section ('Other asymmetries') of Chapter 2.

has). Thus he dismisses frustrationism as 'implausible, indeed deeply counter-intuitive'.[4] Of the implication that it is 'wrong to have a child whose life is much better than the life of anyone we know', he says: 'Surely, this cannot be right.'[5]

I now turn to the question whether it matters that my conclusions are so counter-intuitive. Are my arguments instances of reason gone mad? Should my conclusions be dismissed on account of being so eccentric? Although I understand what motivates these questions, my answer to each of them is an emphatic 'no'.

At the outset, it is noteworthy that a view's counter-intuitiveness cannot by itself constitute a decisive consideration against it. This is because intuitions are often profoundly unreliable—a product of mere prejudice. Views that are taken to be deeply counter-intuitive in one place and time are often taken to be obviously true in another. The view that slavery is wrong, or the view that there is nothing wrong with 'miscegenation', were once thought to be highly implausible and counter-intuitive. They are now taken, at least in many parts of the world, to be self-evident. It is not enough, therefore, to find a view or its implications counter-intuitive, or even offensive. One has to examine the arguments for the disliked conclusion. Most of those who have rejected the view that it is wrong to create more people have done so without assessing the argument for that conclusion. They have simply assumed that this view must be false.

One reason against making this assumption is that the conclusion follows from views that are not only accepted by most people but are also quite reasonable. As I explained in Chapter 2, the asymmetry of pleasure and pain constitutes the best explanation of a number of important moral judgements about creating new people. All my argument does is uncover that asymmetry and to show where it leads.

[4] Holtug, Nils, 'On the value of coming into existence', *The Journal of Ethics*, 5 (2001) 383.
[5] Ibid.

It might be suggested, however, that my argument should be understood as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the commitment to asymmetry. In other words, it might be said that accepting my conclusion is more counter-intuitive than rejecting asymmetry. Thus, if one is faced with the choice between accepting my conclusion and rejecting asymmetry, the latter is preferable.

There are a number of problems with this line of argument. First, we should remember just what it is to which we are committed if we reject asymmetry. Of course, there are various ways of rejecting asymmetry, but the least implausible way would be by denying that absent pleasures are 'not bad' and claiming instead that they are 'bad'. This would commit us to saying that we *do* have a (strong?) moral reason and thus a presumptive duty, based on the interests of future possible happy people, to create those people. It would also commit us to saying that we can create a child for that child's sake and that we should regret, for the sake of those happy people whom we could have created but did not create, that we did not create them. Finally, it would commit us not only to regretting that parts of the earth and all the rest of the universe are uninhabited, but also to regretting this out of concern for those who could otherwise have come into existence in these places.

Matters become still worse if we attempt to abandon asymmetry in another way—by claming that absent pains in Scenario B are merely 'not bad'. That would commit us to saying that we have no moral reason, grounded in the interests of a possible future suffering person, to avoid creating that person. We could no longer regret, based on the interests of a suffering child, that we created that child. Nor could we regret, for the sake of miserable people suffering in some part of the world, that they were ever created.

Those who treat my argument as a *reductio* of asymmetry may find it easier to *say* that they are prepared to abandon asymmetry than actually to *embrace* the implications of doing so. It certainly will not suffice to say that it is better to give up asymmetry and

then to proceed, in their ethical theorizing and in their practice, as though asymmetry still held. At the very least, then, my argument should force them to wrestle with the full implications of rejecting asymmetry, which extend well beyond those that I have outlined. I doubt very much that many of those who say that they would rather give up asymmetry really would abandon it.

A second problem with treating my argument as a *reductio* of asymmetry is that although my conclusions may be counter-intuitive, the dominant intuitions in this matter seem thoroughly untrustworthy. This is so for two reasons.

First, why should we think that it is acceptable to cause great harm to somebody—which the arguments in Chapter 3 show we do whenever we create a child—when we could avoid doing so without depriving that person of anything? In other words, how reliable can an intuition be if, even absent the interests of others, it allows the infliction of great harm that could have been avoided without *any* cost to the person who is harmed? Such an intuition would not be worthy of respect in any other context. Why should it be thought to have such force only in procreative contexts?

Secondly, we have excellent reason for thinking that pro-natal intuitions are the product of (at least non-rational, but possibly irrational) psychological forces. As I showed in Chapter 3, there are pervasive and powerful features of human psychology that lead people to think that their lives are better than they really are. Thus their judgements are unreliable. Moreover, there is a good evolutionary explanation for the deep-seated belief that people do not harm their children seriously by bringing them into existence. Those who do not have this belief are less likely to reproduce. Those with reproduction-enhancing beliefs are more likely to breed and pass on whatever attributes incline one to such beliefs.

What is important to both of these reasons is that it is not merely my extreme claim—that coming into existence is a harm even when a life contains only an iota of suffering—that is counter-intuitive. My more moderate claim—that there is sufficient bad in

all actual lives to make coming into existence a harm, even if lives with only an iota of bad would not be harmful—is also counter-intuitive. If only the extreme claim ran counter to common intuitions, then these intuitions would be (somewhat) less suspect. However, then it would have to be said that my extreme claim would be more palatable if all actual lives were largely devoid of bad. This is because the claim would be primarily of theoretical interest and would have little application for procreation, given that the interests of existent people could more plausibly be thought to outweigh the harm to new people. But it is not merely my extreme claim that runs counter to most people's intuitions. Most people think it is implausible that it is harmful and wrong to start lives filled with as much bad as all actual lives contain. Worse still, those who would treat my argument as a *reductio* of asymmetry should note that their argument could also be used by a species doomed to lives much worse than our own. Although we might see their lives as great harms, if they were subject to the kinds of optimistic psychological forces characteristic of humans they too would argue that it is counter-intuitive to claim that they were harmed by being brought into existence. That which would not be counter-intuitive from our perspective would be counter-intuitive from theirs. Yet we can see, with the benefit of some distance from their lives, that little store should be placed on their intuitions about this matter. Something similar can be said about the common human intuition that creating (most) humans is not a harm.[6]

[6] As it happens, not all humans share the common intuition that procreation is morally acceptable. There are a non-negligible number of reasonable people who accept an anti-natal view. Not infrequently we hear of people who say that ours is not the sort of world into which children should be brought. The underlying idea is that we live in a world of suffering—a claim I defended in the final section of Chapter 3—and it would be best to avoid creating any new victims of such suffering. I am ready to admit that there are relatively few people who think this, and fewer still who have the strength to act on it, but they are not a lunatic fringe. Moreover, others can understand and make sense of their views and motivations,

There are good reasons, then, for *not* treating my conclusion as a *reductio* of asymmetry. In short, when one has a powerful argument, based on highly plausible premisses, for a conclusion that if acted upon would reduce suffering without depriving the suffering person of anything, but which is rejected merely because of primal psychological features that compromise our judgement, then the counter-intuitiveness of the conclusion should not count against it. No doubt there will be some people who are unconvinced by this. If the reason for this is that they take the (alleged) absurdity of my conclusion as axiomatic, then there is nothing that I could say that would convince them. Whatever argument I mustered for my conclusion they would consider refuted by the conclusion it generated. This, however, would not demonstrate a defect in my argument. It would demonstrate only that the negation of my conclusion had attained the status of dogma. There is nothing one can say to convince the dogmatic.

There are some people, and I am among them, who think that there is nothing implausible either in the view that coming into existence is always a harm or in the view that we ought not to have children.[7] It is highly unlikely that a large proportion of humanity

even if they do not agree or follow suit. I agree that the suffering that potential people are likely to endure is sufficient for it to be preferable that they not come into existence. My argument in Chapter 2 extends this widely intelligible intuition and shows that even much less suffering—indeed any suffering at all—would be sufficient to make coming into existence a harm. I emphasize again that although my argument suggests that so long as there is anything bad in a life it is better not to start it, if the amount of bad in a life were truly miniscule then it need not be wrong to have children. This is because the harm could more plausibly be outweighed by the benefits to others. However, as I argued in Chapter 3, the harm in every life is far from miniscule. People's lives, even the most blessed ones, go much worse than is usually thought. Moreover, there is little reason for anybody to think that a potential child will be among the most blessed. There are simply too many things that can go wrong.

[7] Among philosophers, these include not only Christoph Fehige and Seana Shiffrin, both of whom were discussed in the penultimate section of Chapter 2, but also Hermann Vetter, 'Utilitarianism and New Generations', *Mind*, 80/318 (1971) 301–2.

will come to share this view. That is deeply regrettable—because of the immense amount of suffering that this will cause between now and the ultimate demise of humanity.

RESPONDING TO THE OPTIMIST

By most accounts, the views I have defended in this book are rather pessimistic. Pessimism, like optimism, can mean different things, of course.[8] One kind of pessimism or optimism is about the facts. Here pessimists and optimists disagree about what is or will be the case. Thus, they might disagree about whether there is more pleasure or pain in the world at any given time or about whether some person will or will not recover from cancer. A second kind of pessimism and optimism is not about the facts, but about an evaluation of the facts. Here pessimists and optimists disagree not about what is or will be the case, but instead about whether what is or will be the case is good or bad. An optimist of this kind might agree with the pessimist, for example, that there is more pain than pleasure, but think that the pain is worth the pleasure. Alternatively, the pessimist might agree with the optimist that there is more pleasure than pain, but deny that even that quantity of pleasure is worth the pain. The 'is or will be' clause in both the factual and evaluative versions refers to a third distinction, but one that obviously cuts across the first two. Very often pessimism and optimism are understood to be future-oriented—to refer to assessments of how things will be. However, both terms are also sometimes used in either a non-future-oriented or alternatively a timeless sense.

The view that coming into existence is always a serious harm is pessimistic in both a factual and evaluative sense. I have suggested, factually, that human life contains much more pain (and other

[8] Much of the rest of this paragraph is drawn from my Introduction to David Benatar (ed.), *Life, Death and Meaning* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) 15.

negative things) than people realize. Evaluatively, I have endorsed the asymmetry of pleasure and pain and suggested that whereas life's pleasures do not make life worth starting, life's pains do make life not worth starting. In future-oriented terms, my view is pessimistic in most ways but could be construed as optimistic in one way. Given how much suffering occurs every minute, there is very good reason to think that there will be much more suffering before sentient life comes to an end, although I cannot predict with any certainty just *how* much more suffering there will be. All things being equal, the longer sentient life continues, the more suffering there will be. However, there is an optimistic spin on my view, as I noted in Chapter 6. Humanity and other sentient life will eventually come to an end. For those who judge the demise of humanity to be a bad thing, the prediction that this is what will occur is a pessimistic one. By contrast, combining my evaluation that it would be better if there where no more people with the prediction that there will come a time when there will be no more people yields an optimistic assessment. Things are bad now, but they will not always be bad. On the other hand, again, if one thinks that the better state of affairs will be a long time in coming, then one could characterize the view that it is far off as pessimistic.

Pessimism tends not to be well received. On account of the psychological dispositions to think that things are better than they are, which I discussed in Chapter 3, people want to hear positive messages. They want to hear that things are better than they think, not worse. Indeed, where there is not a pathologizing of pessimism by placing it under the rubric of 'depression', there is often an impatience with or condemnation of it. Some people will have these reactions to the view that coming into existence is always a harm. These optimists will dismiss this view as weak and self-indulgent. They may tell us that we cannot 'cry over spilled milk'. We have already come into existence and there is no use bemoaning that fact in lugubrious self-pitying. We must 'count our blessings', 'make the most of life', 'take pleasure', and 'look on the bright side'.

There are good reasons not to be intimidated by the optimist's chidings. First, optimism cannot be the right view merely because it is cheery, just as pessimism cannot be the right view merely because it is grim. Which view we adopt must depend on the evidence. I have argued in this book that a grim view about coming into existence is the right one.

Secondly, one can regret one's existence without being self-pitying. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with a modicum of self-pity. If one pities others, why should one not pity oneself, at least in moderation? In any event, the view I have defended is not only self-regarding but also other-regarding in its relevance. It provides a basis not only for regretting one's own existence but also for not having children. In other words, it has relevance for milk that has not yet been spilled and need not ever be spilled.

Thirdly, there is nothing in my view that suggests we should not 'count our blessings' if by this one means that one should be pleased that one's life is not still worse than it is. A few of us are very lucky *relative* to much of the species. There is no harm—and there may be benefits—in recognizing this. But the injunction to count one's blessings is much less compelling when it entails deceiving oneself into thinking that one was actually lucky to have come into existence. It is like being grateful that one is in a first-class cabin on the *Titanic* as one awaits descent to one's watery grave. It may be better to die in first-class than in steerage, but not so much better as to count oneself very lucky. Nor does my view preclude our making the most of life or taking pleasure whenever we can (within the constraints of morality). I have argued that our lives are very bad. There is no reason why we should not try to make them less so, on condition that we do not spread the suffering (including the harm of existence).

Finally, the optimist's impatience with or condemnation of pessimism often has a smug macho tone to it (although males have no monopoly of it). There is a scorn for the perceived weakness

of the pessimist who should instead 'grin and bear it'. This view is defective for the same reason that macho views about other kinds of suffering are defective. It is an indifference to or inappropriate denial of suffering, whether one's own or that of others. The injunction to 'look on the bright side' should be greeted with a large dose of both scepticism and cynicism. To insist that the bright side is always the right side is to put ideology before the evidence. Every cloud, to change metaphors, may have a silver lining, but it may very often be the cloud rather than the lining on which one should focus if one is to avoid being drenched by self-deception. Cheery optimists have a much less realistic view of themselves than do those who are depressed.[9]

Optimists might respond that even if I am right that coming into existence is always a harm it is better not to dwell on this fact, for to dwell on it only compounds the harm by making one miserable. There is an element of truth here. However, we need to put it in perspective. An acute sense of regret about one's own existence is probably the most effective way to avoid inflicting that same harm on others. If people are able to recognize the harm of having come into existence but still remain cheery without slipping into the practice of making new people, their cheer should not be begrudged. However, if their cheer comes at the cost of self-deception and resultant procreation, then they are susceptible to a charge of having lost perspective. They may be happier than others, but that does not make them right.

DEATH AND SUICIDE

Many people believe that it is an implication of the view that coming into existence is always a harm that it would be preferable to

[9] For a discussion of this see Taylor, Shelley E., and Brown, Jonathon D., 'Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health', *Psychological Bulletin*, 103/2 (1998) 193–210.

die than to continue living. Some people go so far as to say that the view that coming into existence is a harm implies the desirability not simply of death but of suicide.

There is nothing incoherent about the view that coming into existence is a harm and that if one does come into existence ceasing to exist is better than continuing to exist. This is the view expressed in the following quotation from Sophocles:

> Never to have been born is best
> But if we must see the light, the next best
> Is quickly returning whence we came.
> When youth departs, with all its follies,
> Who does not stagger under evils? Who escapes them?[10]

And it is implicit in, or at least compatible with, Montesquieu's claim that 'Men should be bewailed at their birth and not at their death'.[11]

Nevertheless, the view that coming into existence is always a harm does *not imply* that death is better than continuing to exist, and a fortiori that suicide is (always) desirable.[12] Life may be sufficiently bad that it is better not to come into existence, but not so bad that it is better to cease existing. It will be recalled, from Chapter 2, that it is possible to have different evaluations of future-life and present-life cases. I explained in that chapter

[10] Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, lines 1224–31.

[11] Montesquieu, 'Letter Forty', *Persian Letters,* trans. John Davidson, 1 (London: Gibbings & Company, 1899) 123.

[12] Commenting on the apparent oddity of regretting one's existence yet clinging to life, Woody Allen speaks of two Jews eating in a restaurant in the Catskills. The one says to the other: 'The food here is terrible.' The other replies: 'Yes, and the portions are so small.' At one level, there is nothing strange about disliking some food and complaining that there is not more of it. Not having enough food—going hungry—is bad even if the alternative is to satiate oneself with food that does not taste very nice. The reason why the Woody Allen image is odd and funny is that we assume that the pair are not in need of the extra food—either that their eating is more recreational or that the portions are big *enough*. The same dialogue between two Jews in Auschwitz would not be funny at all, because it wouldn't be odd at all to complain both about the quality and quantity of the food.

that there is good reason for setting the quality threshold for a life worth starting higher than the quality threshold for a life worth continuing. This is because the existent can have interests in continuing to exist, and thus harms that make life not worth continuing must be sufficiently severe to defeat those interests. By contrast, the non-existent have no interest in coming into existence. Therefore, the avoidance of even lesser harms—or, on my view, *any* harm—will be decisive.

Thus, it is because we (usually) have an interest in continuing to exist that death may be thought of as a harm, even though coming into existence is also a harm. Indeed, the harm of death may partially explain why coming into existence is a harm. Coming into existence is bad in part because it invariably leads to the harm of ceasing to exist. That may be behind George Santayana's claim that the 'fact of having been born is a very bad augury for immortality'.[13] That we are born destined to die is, on this view, a great harm.

The view that one has an interest in continuing to live (so long as the quality of one's life has not fallen beneath the lower threshold of a life worth continuing) is a common one. However, it has been subjected to ancient and resilient objections. Epicurus famously argued that death is not bad for the one who dies because so long as one exists, one is not dead, and once death arrives one no longer exists. Thus, my being dead (in contrast to my dying) is not something that I can experience. Nor is it a condition in which I can be. Instead it is a condition in which I am not. Accordingly my death is not something that can be bad for me. Lucretius, a disciple of Epicurus' and thus also an Epicurean, advanced a further argument against death's being a harm. He argued that since we do not regret the period of non-existence before we came into being, we should not regret the non-existence that follows our lives.

[13] Santayana, George, *Reason in Religion* (vol. iii of *The Life of Reason*) (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922) 240.

The Epicurean arguments assume that death is the irreversible cessation of existence. Those who think that there is life after death reject this assumption. Whether or not death is bad on this alternative view depends on how good the post-mortem life is. Although this is a topic about which there is much speculation, nothing vaguely testable can be said about it. In considering whether my argument entails that death is preferable to continued life, I shall join the Epicureans in assuming that death is the irreversible cessation of existence.

The view that death is not bad for the one who died is at odds with a number of deeply held views. Among these is the view that murder harms the victim. It is also incompatible with the view that a longer life is, all things being equal, better than a shorter one. And it is in conflict with the view that we ought to respect the wishes of those who are now dead (quite independently of the effect that not doing so would have on the still living). This is because if death is not a harm, then nothing that happens after death can be a harm.

Counter-intuitiveness, by itself, is not enough to show that a view is mistaken, as I have argued. However, there are some important differences between the counter-intuitiveness of the Epicurean arguments and the counter-intuitiveness of my anti-natalist arguments. First, the Epicurean conclusion is more radically counter-intuitive than my conclusion. I suspect that more people think, and feel more strongly, that murder harms the victim than who think that coming into existence is not a harm. Indeed there are very many people who believe that coming into existence is often a harm and there are still more people who believe that it is never a benefit even if they think that it is not also a harm. Yet there are very few people who truly believe that murder does not harm the victim. Even where the victim's life was of a poor quality, it is widely thought that killing that person without his consent (where consent could have been obtained) is to wrong him. Secondly, a precautionary principle applies asymmetrically to the two views. If the Epicurean is wrong, then people's acting on the Epicurean

argument (by killing others or themselves) would seriously harm those who were killed. By contrast, if my view is mistaken, people's acting on my view (by having failed to procreate) would not harm those who were not brought into existence. These differences in the counter-intuitiveness of the Epicurean and anti-natal views are not sufficient, however, to dismiss the Epicurean arguments out of hand. Therefore, I turn now to consider, albeit only briefly, responses to both Epicurean arguments.

I start with Lucretius' argument. The best way to respond to this argument is to deny that there is symmetry between pre-vital and post-mortem non-existence.[14] Whereas any one of us could live longer, none of us could have come into existence much earlier. This argument becomes very powerful when we recognize the kind of existence that we value. It is not some 'metaphysical essence', but rather a thicker, richer conception of the self,[15] that embodies one's particular memories, beliefs, commitments, desires, aspirations, and so on. One's identity, in this thicker sense, is constructed from one's particular history. But even if one's metaphysical essence could have come into existence earlier, the history of that being would have been so different that it would not be the same person as one is. Yet, things are quite different at the other end of life. Personal histories—biographies—can be lengthened by not dying sooner. Once one is, one can continue to be for longer. But an earlier coming into existence would have been the coming into existence of a different person—one with whom one might have very little in common.

The most common response to Epicurus' argument is to say that death is bad for the person who dies because it deprives that person of future life and the positive features thereof. The deprivation account of death's badness does not entail that death is *always* bad

[14] The term 'pre-vital non-existence' is Frederik Kaufman's. See his 'Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 36/1 (1999) 1–19.

[15] The argument I outline here is Frederik Kaufman's. See his 'Pre-Vital and Post-Mortem Non-Existence'.

for the one who dies. Indeed, where the further life of which somebody is deprived is of a sufficiently poor quality, death is not bad for that person. Instead it is good. The Epicurean argument, however, is that death is *never* bad for the person who dies. The deprivation account is a response to this, and claims that death can *sometimes* be bad for the person who dies. On the deprivation account, even though a person no longer exists after his death, it is still true that his death deprives him, the 'ante-mortem'[16] person, of the further life he could have enjoyed.

Defenders of Epicurus take issue with the deprivation account. One objection is that advocates of the deprivation account cannot say *when* the harm of death occurs—that is, they cannot date the time of the harm. The time of the harm cannot be when death occurs because by that time the person who non-Epicureans say is harmed by the death no longer exists. And if it is the ante-mortem person who is harmed, one cannot say that the time at which that person is harmed is the time of his death, because that would involve backward causation—a later event causing an earlier harm. One response to this challenge is to say that the time at which death harms is 'always' or 'eternally'.[17] George Pitcher offers a helpful analogy. He says that if 'the world should be blasted to smithereens during the next presidency. . .this would make it true (be responsible for the fact) that even now, during. . .[the current president's] term, he is the penultimate president of the United States'.[18] Similarly, one's later death makes it true that even now one is doomed not to live longer than one will. Just as there is no backward causation in the case of the penultimate president, so there is no backward causation in a death that harms one all along.

[16] The term 'ante-mortem' person is George Pitcher's. See his 'The Misfortunes of the Dead', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 21/2 (1984) 183–8.

[17] The term 'eternally' is Fred Feldman's, See his 'Some Puzzles About the Evil of Death', *Philosophical Review*, 100/2 (1991) 205–27.

[18] Pitcher, George, 'The Misfortunes of the Dead', 188.

There is a more fundamental (but not clearly more powerful) objection to the deprivation account. Defenders of Epicurus simply deny that those who have ceased to exist can be deprived of anything. David Suits, for example, argues that although the ante-mortem person may indeed be worse off than he would otherwise have been had he lived longer, being worse off in this 'purely relational' way is not thought to be sufficient to show that he is harmed.[19] He argues further that even if it were, there cannot be real deprivation if there is nobody *left* to be deprived. One can only be deprived if one exists.

But here we seem to have an impasse. Defenders of the deprivation account seem to think that death is different and that it is the one kind of case in which somebody can be deprived without existing. Epicureans, by contrast, insist that death cannot be different and we must treat deprivation in the same way here as we do in all other cases. In no other cases can a person be deprived without existing, so a person cannot be deprived by death, given that death brings the end of his existence.

Perhaps there is a way to get past this impasse, but I shall not seek it now. I have shown that the view that coming into existence is a harm does not *entail* the view that ceasing to exist is better than continuing to exist. One can maintain that both are harms. Epicureans deny that ceasing to exist can be a harm. They may also be committed to saying that death can never be *good* for the one who dies, no matter how bad that person's life has become. Following the Epicurean reasoning, death can never benefit a person because so long as he is, death is not, and when death arrives he no longer is. Death cannot *spare* anybody from anything any more than it can *deprive* anybody of anything.

[19] Suits, David B., 'Why death is not bad for the one who died', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 38/1 (2001) 69–84.

Those who reject the Epicurean view can hold one of a number of positions:

a) Death is always a harm.
b) Death is always a benefit.
c) Death is sometimes a harm and sometimes a benefit.

The first option is implausible. Life can be so bad that it is better to die. Those who deny that coming into existence is always a harm, obviously reject the second option. On this view, coming into existence is not bad and may even be good, and continuing to exist is good so long as the quality of one's life is of a sufficiently high standard. Thus death cannot always be a benefit. I said earlier that those who adopt the view that coming into existence is always a harm can also reject the second option. They can argue that whereas we have no interest in coming into existence, once we do exist, we have an interest in continuing to exist. On the assumption that this interest is not always defeated by the poor quality of life, death is not always a benefit. But is this assumption reasonable, given how serious a harm I have said it is to come into existence? I think that it is, but saying that it is a reasonable assumption is not to make a very strong claim. It is to say only that the quality of life is not *always* so poor that ceasing to exist is a benefit. It leaves wide open the question of how often it is not so poor.

This is not a question I need to answer. By a principle of autonomy we parcel out the authority to make decisions about the quality of individual lives to those whose lives they are. Unlike autonomous decisions to procreate, autonomous decisions to continue living or to die are made by those whose lives are in question. It is true that if people's lives are worse than they think (as I argued in Chapter 3) their assessments about whether their lives are worth continuing may be mistaken. Nevertheless, that is the sort of mistake we should allow people to make. It is a mistake, the consequences of which they must bear—unlike the mistake of thinking that the lives of one's potential offspring will be better than one thinks. Similarly,

the desire to continue living may or may not be irrational, but even if it is, this is the kind of irrationality, unlike a preference for having come into existence, that should be decisive (at least in practice if not in theory).

Matters are a little different when the decision to end a life is not made by an autonomous being for himself, but is instead made on behalf of a being that lacks the ability to make the judgement for itself (and has left neither an advance directive nor a durable power of attorney). These are the hardest cases. Unlike deciding whether to create a new life, where one can err on the side of caution by not creating a new life, there is no clear side of caution on which to err when it comes to ending a life.

Thus I share a version of the third option listed above—that death is sometimes a harm and sometimes a benefit. This third option is the common sense view, but my version will deviate from the usual interpretation of it. That is to say, it is likely that my version allows for death to be a benefit more often than the usual view. For example, my view would be more tolerant of rational suicide than would the common view. Indeed, I would claim more suicides to be rational than would the common view. In many cultures (including most western cultures), there is immense prejudice against suicide. It is often viewed as cowardly[20] where it is not dismissed as a consequence of mental illness. My view allows the possibility that suicide may more often be rational and may even be more rational than continuing to exist. This is because it may be an irrational love for life that keeps many people alive when their lives have actually become so bad that ceasing to exist would be better. This is the view expressed by the old woman in Voltaire's *Candide*:

> A hundred times I wished to kill myself, but my love of life persisted. This ridiculous weakness is perhaps one of the most fatal of our faults.

[20] In other cultures, interestingly, it is the failure to commit suicide in certain circumstances that is viewed as being cowardly.

For what could be more stupid than to go on carrying a burden that we always long to lay down? To loathe, and yet cling to, existence? In short, to cherish the serpent that devours us, until it has eaten our hearts?[21]

This is not to offer a general recommendation of suicide. Suicide, like death from other causes, makes the lives of those who are bereaved much worse. Rushing into one's own suicide can have profound negative impact on the lives of those close to one. Although an Epicurean may be committed to not caring about what happens after his death, it is still the case that the bereaved suffer a harm even if the deceased does not. That suicide harms those who are thereby bereaved is part of the tragedy of coming into existence. We find ourselves in a kind of trap. We have already come into existence. To end our existence causes immense pain to those we love and for whom we care. Potential procreators would do well to consider this trap they lay when they produce offspring. It is not the case that one can create new people on the assumption that if they are not pleased to have come into existence they can simply kill themselves. Once somebody has come into existence and attachments with that person have been formed, suicide can cause the kind of pain that makes the pain of childlessness mild by comparison. Somebody contemplating suicide knows (or should know) this. This places an important obstacle in the way of suicide. One's life may be bad, but one must consider what affect ending it would have on one's family and friends. There will be times when life has become so bad that it is unreasonable for the interests of the loved ones in having the person alive to outweigh that person's interests in ceasing to exist. When this is true will depend in part on particular features of the person for whom continued life is a burden. Different people are able to bear different magnitudes of burden. It may even be indecent for family members to expect that person to continue living. On other occasions one's life may be bad but not so bad as to warrant killing oneself and thereby making

[21] Voltaire, *Candide* (London: Penguin Books, 1997) 32–3.

the lives of one's family and friends still much worse than they already are.

RELIGIOUS VIEWS

There are some people who will reject, on religious grounds, the views that coming into existence is always a harm and that we ought not to have children. For some such people, the Biblical injunction to 'be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth'[22] will constitute a refutation of my views. Such a response assumes, of course, that God exists. This is no place to discuss *God's* existence. Whether or not the (mono-)theists are right, God never came into existence. If they are right, God always existed, and if they are wrong God never existed. Moreover, what I have said about the quality of human (and animal) life would not entail anything about the quality of Divine life. And thus I leave aside the question of God's existence.

The religious response also assumes that Biblical imperatives are the expression of what God requires of us. This may seem uncontroversial for those who accept that the Bible is the word of God. However, very many Biblical commandments are not thought to be binding, even by religious people. For example, no religion I know of currently endorses, as a practical matter, putting to death one's rebellious son, the Biblical commandment to do so notwithstanding.[23] Even the commandment to be fruitful and multiply is not viewed as absolute. For example, Catholicism must exempt priests and nuns from procreation, given that it forbids those occupying such positions from engaging in the intercourse that leads to procreation and prohibits procreation by non-sexual means. Whereas Catholics permit procreation (in the context of marriage) for others, the Shakers advocated celibacy for everybody, including married couples.

[22] Genesis 1:28. [23] Deuteronomy 21:18–21.

A third and more interesting response to the religious argument is that the religious argument assumes too monolithic a view of religion. Although any one religion is often thought and said to speak with one voice on any given topic, there is in fact a range of divergent views even within a single religion and within a single denomination of a religion. Brief illustration of this can be provided with reference to one's coming into existence.

The epigraphs at the beginning of Chapter 5 show both Jeremiah and Job ruing their births. Job regrets his having been conceived and the fact that he did not die *in utero* or at birth. Jeremiah goes further and curses the man who did not abort him. It is striking how different such views are from those of the cheery fundamentalist with an unsophisticated, monolithic view of the right way. Whereas Jeremiah and Job think and speak freely—even challenge God himself—all too few religious believers follow suit. For them piety precludes such critical thinking and speaking.

Now it might be suggested that both Jeremiah and Job regretted their own existences for reasons specific to the content of their lives—because, for one reason or another, the quality of their lives was poor. On this view, there are some lives of which it is true that it would have been better had they not been started, but it is not true of all lives. That view seems at odds with the epigraph from Ecclesiastes at the beginning of this chapter. Those verses show a Biblical author envying all those who have not come into existence.

Nor is the Bible the only religious text in which we find alternative religious views about the disvalue of coming into existence. The Talmud,[24] for example, briefly records the subject of a fascinating debate between two famous early rabbinic schools—the House of Hillel and the House of Shammai. We are told that they debated the question whether or not it was better for humans to have been created. The House of Hillel, known for its generally more lenient and humane views, maintained that it was indeed

[24] Tractate Eruvin 13b.

better that humans were created. The House of Shammai maintained, by contrast, that it would have been better had humans not been created. The Talmud relates that these two schools debated the matter for two and a half years and the issue was eventually settled in favour of the House of Shammai. This is particularly noteworthy, because in cases of disagreement between these two schools, the law almost always follows the House of Hillel. Yet here we have a decision in favour of Shammai, endorsing the view that it would have been better had humans not been created. This kind of second-guessing of God would not cross the minds of the self-consciously pious. But the fact remains that religious traditions can embody views that superficial religious thinkers would take to be antithetical to religiosity. Recognition of this might prevent a quick dismissal of my views on religious grounds.

MISANTHROPY AND PHILANTHROPY

The conclusions I have reached will strike many people as deeply misanthropic. I have argued that life is filled with unpleasantness and suffering, that we should avoid having children, and that it would be best if humanity came to an end sooner rather than later. This may sound like misanthropy. However, the overwhelming thrust of my arguments, as they apply to humans, is philanthropic, not misanthropic. Because my arguments apply not only to humans but also to other sentient animals, my arguments are also zoophilic (in the non-sexual sense of that term). Bringing a sentient life into existence is a harm to the being whose life it is. My arguments suggest that it is wrong to inflict this harm. To argue against the infliction of harm arises from concern for, not dislike of, those who would be harmed. It may seem like an odd kind of philanthropy—one that if acted upon, would lead to the end of all *anthropos*. It is, however, the most effective way of preventing

suffering. Not creating a person absolutely guarantees that that potential person will not suffer—because that person will not exist.

Although the arguments I have advanced have not been misanthropic, there is a superb misanthropic argument against having children and in favour of human extinction. This argument rests on the indisputable premiss that humans cause colossal amounts of suffering—both for humans and for non-human animals. In Chapter 3, I provided a brief sketch of the kind of suffering humans inflict on one another. In addition to this, they are the cause of untold suffering to other species. Each year, humans inflict suffering on billions of animals that are reared and killed for food and other commodities or used in scientific research. Then there is the suffering inflicted on those animals whose habitat is destroyed by encroaching humans, the suffering caused to animals by pollution and other environmental degradation, and the gratuitous suffering inflicted out of pure malice.

Although there are many non-human species—especially carnivores—that also cause a lot of suffering, humans have the unfortunate distinction of being the most destructive and harmful species on earth. The amount of suffering in the world could be radically reduced if there were no more humans. Even if the misanthropic argument is not taken to this extreme, it can be used to defend at least a radical reduction of the human population.

Although the end of humanity would greatly reduce the amount of harm, it would not end it all. The remaining sentient beings would continue to suffer and their coming into existence could still be a harm. This is one reason why the misanthropic argument does not go as far as the arguments I have advanced in this book—arguments that arise not from antipathy towards the human species but rather from concern about harms to all sentient beings. Moreover, as resistant as people are to the philanthropic argument, they would be still more resistant to the misanthropic one. But the misanthropic argument is not in the least incompatible with the philanthropic one.

It is unlikely that many people will take to heart the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm. It is even less likely that many people will stop having children. By contrast, it is quite likely that my views either will be ignored or will be dismissed. As this response will account for a great deal of suffering between now and the demise of humanity, it cannot plausibly be thought of as philanthropic. That is not to say that it is motivated by any malice towards humans, but it does result from a self-deceptive indifference to the harm of coming into existence.