

EDITORIAL

“EXTINCTIONISM”: THE END OF UTILITARIANISM

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According to the theory of utilitarianism, an action is right if it produces the greatest good for the greatest number, when the greatest good is the greatest pleasure or happiness and the least pain or sadness and the greatest number are the majority of people.

David Benatar is a South African professor of philosophy and a utilitarian. His best known work to date is entitled “Better never to have been: the harm of coming into existence.” The basic argument seems to be that it is morally wrong to create more sentient beings as simply coming into existence brings about harm. This does not depend on the emotions of the person once he has come into existence.

Peter Singer, Professor of philosophy at Princeton University, is another utilitarian atheist. In a piece entitled “Should this be the last generation?”, he wants us to consider sterilizing ourselves. By doing this, we would do less damage to the environment and we would therefore be doing more good than bad:

“It would be impossible to get agreement on universal sterilization, but just imagine that we could... even if we take a less pessimistic view of human existence than Benatar, we could still defend it because it makes us better off, because there won’t be anyone else to be worse off.”

Both Benatar and Singer appear to be re-stating the view of Arthur Schopenhauer who wrote in “The world as Will and Representation” that creatures continue to exist for a time “merely devouring each other, pass their existence in anxiety and want, and endure often terrible affliction, until they fall at last into the arms of death.” He further wrote that we ought to be sorry about the existence of the world: its non-existence would be preferable to its existence. One is here reminded of the statement of Richard Dawkins:

“The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference.” To be fair on Dawkins, perhaps an indifferent universe is better than a wicked one.

Benatar is not arguing simply for the eradication of poverty by eradicating the poor by means of mass sterilization. Rather, it is better for all of us to work towards our extinction. He does however, appear to tolerate our continued existence once we are already in being. It is presumably better for us not to arrange mass suicide ceremonies as this would distress those who continue in existence and this would lead to more overall harm than good.

Life for Benatar is not a fundamental basis for human flourishing but of “human floundering” when we encounter pain and misery. He is therefore a strong advocate of

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assisted suicide, voluntary euthanasia and non-voluntary euthanasia for those who are not competent to judge for themselves. In keeping with his philosophy, he does not advocate a distinct right to die in order to defend assisted suicide: "The attribution of a right to life to competent adults entails the moral permissibility of assisted suicide and if that is not possible, voluntary euthanasia." We therefore do not regard the person as worthless because a worthless person is not worth bothering about. We care enough to kill and for Benatar, the right to die is derivative from a right to life.

It is hardly surprising that Benatar favours non-voluntary euthanasia as "there are many human-infants and those who are seriously mentally disabled - whose understanding and ability to choose is less than that of many animals."

It would be easy to dismiss these opinions as the ravings of a couple of mavericks. Unfortunately both Benatar and Singer are well established figures in the world of philosophy and are in a position to strongly influence others. Already we read of women who proudly choose abortion in order to make the world a more green and less populated place.

This drift towards nihilism is a new low in the history of the utilitarian movement.

For the "extinctionist", it is not sufficiently strong to say that a woman has a right to choose abortion. Rather, there are occasions when we have a moral obligation to opt for abortion, infanticide and euthanasia. One is reminded of Lady Warnock and her "duty to die" argument.

Benatar accepts the possibility that legalising voluntary euthanasia might lead to a situation in which euthanasia becomes common:

"In the Netherlands, it has become permissible under some circumstances to assist the suicide of people who are suffering from severe mental anguish even though they have no bodily illness. The Netherlands now also allows non-voluntary euthanasia - euthanasia of those who lack the competence to decide whether their lives are worth continuing."

Once euthanasia becomes a legal option, Benatar concedes that "more people would come to want it and those who did not come to want it might feel pressure to request the ending of their lives if they become a burden on their families or other caregivers." However, for Bentar, "although it is true that many of our preferences are, to a significant extent, a product of our social context, it is far from clear that for this reason these preferences should not be respected." After all, he argues, religious people come from religious families. As we respect the autonomy of these people, so should we be accepting of the autonomy of those socially conditioned to approve of euthanasia.

It is worrying to note that some politicians seriously espouse these views. According to them, a world with less people would be less polluted and would make for a greener and more pleasant land. An Australian Senator has co-authored a book with Peter Singer. Human persons are regarded as mere pollutants of the planet. That is why there is an urgent need for an authentic Catholic environmentalism that respects and cherishes the environment while also celebrating every human being created within that environment.

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