



The Human Predicament

*A Candid
Guide to
Life's Biggest
Questions*

DAVID
BENATAR

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To family and friends, who palliate my predicament.

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P R E F A C E

We are born, we live, we suffer along the way, and then we die—obliterated for the rest of eternity. Our existence is but a blip in cosmic time and space. It is not surprising that so many people ask: “What is it all about?”

The right answer, I argue in this book, is “ultimately nothing.” Despite some limited consolations, the human condition is in fact a tragic predicament from which none of us can escape, for the predicament consists not merely in life but also in death.

It should come as no surprise that this is an unpopular view to which there will be considerable resistance. Thus, I ask my readers to keep an open mind while they read the arguments for my (generally though not entirely) bleak view. The truth is often ugly. (For some light relief, see the occasional joke or quip in the notes.)

Some readers may wonder what the relationship is between this book and my previous book (*Better Never to Have Been*¹) in which I argued for other grim views—that coming into existence is a serious harm, and the anti-natalist conclusion that we ought not to create new beings. The first part of the answer is that, although the earlier book mentioned some of the topics covered in *The Human Predicament*, it did not discuss them in any depth.

The one point of significant overlap between the earlier book and the current one is that both discuss the poor quality of human life. Because I had examined that in some detail in *Better*

Never to Have Been, I did consider omitting it entirely from *The Human Predicament*. However, the quality of life is so much a part of the human predicament that forgoing any examination of it seemed like an egregious omission. That said, the arguments have been developed since I first presented them in *Better Never to Have Been*. I wrote about them afresh in chapter 3 of *Debating Procreation*² and then adapted that chapter for inclusion in *The Human Predicament*.

While the subject matters of *Better Never to Have Been* and *The Human Predicament* are very different, and while the arguments in the latter do not presuppose anti-natalism, they do provide further support for that view.

Although I have been working for many years on the themes covered in this volume, a draft of the book was written while I was a visiting scholar in the Bioethics Department at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), in Bethesda, Maryland. I am required to state—which I do with some amusement, because it is difficult in this case to imagine the confusion—that “the views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Clinical Center, the National Institutes of Health, or the Department of Health and Human Services.”

It is my *pleasure* to add my thanks to the Bioethics Department for sponsoring my visit and for welcoming me for the stimulating academic year (2014–2015) I spent there. The theme of the Bioethics Department’s Joint Bioethics Colloquium in the spring semester was “death,” a happy coincidence about an unhappy topic. I benefited from discussions there and in a similarly themed reading group. At the NIH, I received helpful feedback on two chapters of the book. One of those chapters was also presented at both a brown bag seminar in the Philosophy Department at

George Washington University and a seminar in the Philosophy Department at the University of Cape Town. A paper adapted from one of the chapters was presented at a conference of the International Association for the Philosophy of Death and Dying in Syracuse, New York.

For helpful comments, I am grateful to participants in these forums. Special thanks to Joseph Millum and David Wasserman, who provided detailed written feedback on one chapter; to Travis Timmerman and Frederik Kaufman for written comments on the paper I presented at the conference on death and dying; and to David DeGrazia and Rivka Weinberg, who read and commented on the entire manuscript.

Jessica du Toit constructed the bibliography from my end-notes and converted all the references to the required style, meticulously detecting and correcting some errors in the process.

My thanks are also owed to the University of Cape Town for granting me the leave that enabled me to take up the visiting position at the National Institutes of Health and thus to write the book. I am also grateful to Peter Ohlin at Oxford University Press for his interest in the book and his helpful comments.

Finally, I extend my thanks to family and friends. They share the human predicament but meliorate mine. This book is dedicated to them.

D.B.
Cape Town
August 14, 2016

A READER'S GUIDE

The big existential questions may be thought to be the bread and butter of philosophers. Indeed, many philosophers, along with writers, artists, and others, have grappled with them. However, most of those philosophers who have examined these issues in ways that engage public interest have been philosophers from the (European) “continental” tradition. Think here of the French and German existentialists. Their style of writing is often more literary and evocative. While it has widespread appeal, analytic philosophers, who are more common in the Anglophone world, have often criticized this writing for being excessively obscure and insufficiently precise.

Analytic philosophers are—or at least profess to be—interested in rigorous arguments in which key terms are explicated, distinctions are drawn, and conclusions are validly inferred from premises. I agree that this sort of methodology is the path to wisdom in these and other matters. However, many—but by no means all, or even most—of those analytic philosophers who have engaged life’s big questions have eviscerated these questions by descending into dry and arcane discussions about them. Readers fascinated by the questions are rapidly reduced to boredom.

Admittedly, it is difficult to navigate the correct path—a path that avoids the obscurantism of excessive rhetorical flourish and grand but imprecise pronouncements, but that also avoids abstruse, dull, hairsplitting analysis. In other words, it is not easy

to present an accessible, engaging, and rigorous discussion of complex issues.

This book is not a work of popular philosophy. It is not written in the sort of popular style that appeals to mass audiences, and the views it defends are hardly likely to be popular, for reasons yet to be explained. (In the latter regard, I suppose that one might describe this book as a work of *unpopular* philosophy.) However, it has been written with the goal of being accessible and readable to intelligent lay readers and yet sufficiently rigorous to satisfy the professional (and aspiring professional) philosophers who constitute the other component of the book's intended readership. I can only hope that I have struck the right balance.

However, to assist those who may have less patience with the relatively technical and pedantic parts of the book, I provide here a guide to an abbreviated reading.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This short chapter should be an easy read for all. However, the first and last sections will have the broadest interest. Those readers who are less concerned about understanding some nuances of the nature of pessimism and optimism could skip the section entitled "Pessimism and optimism." The subsequent section ("The human predicament and the animal predicament") explains why I focus on the human predicament rather than the animal predicament more generally and may be skipped by those who do not need persuading.

Chapter 2: Meaning

The introduction to this chapter is essential. The next section (“Understanding the question”) includes smatterings of relatively pedantic analysis, but this is interspersed between more crucial material and thus should be read in its entirety. “The (somewhat) good news” should also be read in full.

Chapter 3: Meaninglessness

The introductory paragraphs of “The bad news” are essential reading, as is the short conclusion. In the bulk of the chapter, sandwiched between these elements, I consider various optimistic responses to the bad news. Impatient readers can pick which of those they wish to read, but I recommend reading them all, with the possible exception of “Nature’s ‘purposes,’” which may be the least interesting of the optimistic responses.

Chapter 4: Quality

This chapter should be accessible to philosophers and non-philosophers alike. If need be, it may be skipped by those familiar with chapter 3 of either *Better Never to Have Been* or *Debating Procreation*. However, even they should read the first section (“The meaning and quality of life”).

Chapter 5: Death

This is by far the longest chapter of the book. Parts of it are also among the most technical (and thus, to some readers, the dullest) parts of the book. Those who do not need convincing that their deaths can be bad for them and who are not interested in the philosophical debates around these issues can skip the sections titled “Is death bad?” and “How bad are different deaths?” that constitute the bulk of the chapter. However, they should know that in skipping those sections, they will miss the arguments that aim at explaining *why* death is bad. I argue that death is bad for more than one reason. One reason is that death deprives one of the good that one would have had if one had not died when one did. The other reason is that death annihilates one—irreversibly ending one’s existence. It follows from this that even when death is not bad, all things considered, because it deprives one of insufficient good to outweigh the bad one will suffer, it is nonetheless still bad in one way. It still annihilates one.

Chapter 6: Immortality

This short chapter should be readily accessible to all readers.

Chapter 7: Suicide

Other than the introductory and concluding sections, both of which should be read, this chapter has two broad parts. The earlier one responds to arguments that suicide is never permissible or rational, while the later one broadens the case for

suicide as a response to aspects of the human predicament. Those who do not need persuading that suicide is sometimes both permissible and rational could skip the earlier part if necessary. They may nonetheless be interested in reading the later part of the chapter.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The brief concluding chapter should be read in full.

I | Introduction

Humankind cannot bear very much reality.

—T.S. ELIOT

“Burnt Norton,” Four Quartets

Life’s big questions

This book is concerned with life’s “big questions”—indeed, the biggest ones: Do our lives have meaning? Is life worth living? How should we respond to the fact that we are going to die? Would it be better if we could live forever? May we, or should we, end our lives earlier—by suicide—than they would otherwise end?

It is difficult to imagine a thinking person who does not, at least one time or another, ponder questions of this kind. Responses to them vary, not only in detail but also in broad orientation. Some people provide ready and comforting answers, whether religious or secular; others find the questions to be insuperably perplexing; while yet others believe that the correct answers to the big questions are generally grim ones.

Although it is inadvisable to scare off one’s readers at the beginning of a book, I should disclose at the outset that my views fall mainly into the third category, which is almost certainly the least popular. I shall argue that the (right) answers to life’s big questions reveal that the human condition is a tragic predicament—one from which there is no escape. In a sentence: Life is bad, but

so is death. Of course, life is not bad in *every* way. Neither is death bad in every way. However, both life and death are, in crucial respects, awful. Together, they constitute an existential vise—the wretched grip that enforces our predicament.

The details of the predicament will be presented in the six chapters that are in between this introduction and the conclusion. However, the broad contours can be summarized here.

First, life has no meaning from a cosmic perspective. Our lives may have meaning to one another (chapter 2), but they have no broader point or purpose (chapter 3). We are insignificant specks in a vast universe that is utterly indifferent to us. The limited meaning that our lives can have is ephemeral rather than enduring.

This is disturbing in itself, but it is even worse because, as I shall argue in chapter 4, our quality of life is as poor as it is. Some lives are obviously worse than others, but even the best lives, contrary to popular opinion, ultimately contain more bad than good. There are compelling explanations why this unfortunate feature of our condition is not widely recognized.

In response to life's cosmic meaninglessness and its poor quality, some might be tempted to think that we must reject another popular opinion, namely that death is bad. If life is bad, then death, it might be argued, must be good—a welcome release from the horrors of life. However, as I argue in chapter 5, we should accept the dominant view that death is bad. The most famous challenges to this view are the Epicurean arguments that death is not bad for the person who dies. The Epicureans did not claim that death is good, but in rejecting their arguments and in endorsing the view that death is bad, I am led to the conclusion that rather than being a (cost-free) solution to the woes of life, death is the second jaw of our existential vise. Death does nothing to counter our cosmic

meaninglessness and usually (though not always) detracts from the more limited meaning that is attainable. Moreover, while death does release us from suffering and, for that reason, is sometimes the least bad outcome, it is, even then, a serious bad. This is because the cost of the release is one's annihilation.

Given how bad death is, it should not be surprising that some have sought to cope by denying our mortality. Some think we will be resurrected, or that we will survive death in some new form. Others think that while we are currently mortal, immortality is within scientific reach. In chapter 6, I respond to such delusions and fantasies, and ask whether immortality, if it were attainable, would be good. This question is not settled by the conclusions of chapter 5 because it is possible to think that death is bad but that immortality would also be bad. For example, death could be bad, but immortality might be even worse. I argue that though immortality would indeed be bad under many circumstances, one could imagine conditions under which the *option* of immortality would be good. The fact that we lack the option of immortality under *those* conditions is part of the human predicament.

The discussion of deathly matters continues in chapter 7, but this time, the topic is death by one's own hand. Given that death is bad, suicide is not a solution to the human predicament. However, because death is sometimes less bad than continued life, suicide has its place among possible responses to our predicament. For this reason, we should reject the widespread idea that suicide is (almost) always irrational. Nor is suicide morally wrong as often as it is commonly thought to be. However, even when it is both rational and morally permissible, it is tragic, not only because of its effect on others, but also because it involves the annihilation of the person whose life ends.

Suicide is not the only response to the human predicament. In the final chapter—the conclusion—I consider other responses after defending my extensive (but not unmitigated) pessimistic view about the human condition against some residual optimistic challenges.

Pessimism and optimism

Although my answers to life's big questions are largely pessimistic, it should be noted immediately that the concepts of "optimism" and "pessimism" are vague and thus slippery.

To gain some clarity, one helpful distinction is between different domains within which optimists and pessimists might disagree. One such domain is the realm of the facts. An optimist might believe that some terrible fate will not befall him, whereas a pessimist might believe that he will fall victim to that fate. They both agree that the fate is terrible, but they have differing views about whether it will occur.¹ This particular example is future-oriented. It is about what *will* occur, but disagreements between optimists and pessimists can also be about past or present facts. For example, one can think that more or fewer people were killed in some historic disaster than were actually killed, or one can believe that there are currently more or fewer starving people than there actually are.

Another domain within which optimists and pessimists might disagree is the realm of evaluation of the facts. It is possible for optimists and pessimists to agree on the facts and yet disagree in their evaluations of these facts. The paradigmatic example, hackneyed though it is, is whether the glass is half

full or half empty.² This is not a disagreement about how much beverage there is in the glass. It is a disagreement about how good or bad those facts are. The optimist declares the state of affairs good because of how much liquid remains, whereas the pessimist mourns the state of affairs because of how much more liquid there could be. If that seems like a trivial case, then consider the following humorous but momentous example: “The optimist proclaims that we live in the best of all possible worlds; and the pessimist fears this is true.”³

At least with reference to some of the big questions, it is not always clear which of the competing views count as optimistic and which count as pessimistic. This is because the same view can sometimes be spun as either optimism or as pessimism. For example, in chapter 6, I discuss and evaluate the view that an immortal life would be bad because such a life would become tedious. Is such a view pessimistic because it offers a negative evaluation of immortality, or does it count as optimistic because it says that the actual state of affairs—human mortality—is better?

At least some writers have suggested that it is a pessimistic view.⁴ I find this usage odd and thus propose to use the terms “optimism” and “pessimism” as follows. Any view of the facts or any evaluation thereof that depicts some element of the human condition in positive terms I shall call an optimistic view. By contrast, I shall describe as pessimistic any view that depicts some element of the human condition in negative terms. (Thus, the claim that immortality would be bad counts as optimistic because it suggests that the fact of mortality is not as bad as we would otherwise think. If we were in fact immortal, then the view that immortality is bad would be pessimistic.)

This usage has a few implications. First, one can be optimistic about one feature of the human condition and pessimistic about another. In other words, the choices are not restricted to being optimistic about every feature or pessimistic about every feature of the human condition. This does not preclude describing an overall view of the human condition as being either optimistic or pessimistic. Such a description would be based on an aggregation of assessments of individual features.⁵ When I describe my own position as pessimistic, this is what I mean. It is not to say that I have a pessimistic view about every last feature of human life.

Second, optimism and pessimism are both matters of degree rather than binary positions. If some feature of the human condition is negative, it can be more or less negative. If some other feature is positive, then, similarly, it can be more or less positive.

It should be clear from this that one can be either too optimistic or too pessimistic about the human condition. One is too optimistic if one thinks that things are (or were, or will be) better than they actually are (or were, or will be). One is too pessimistic if one has a more negative assessment than one should have. I shall be arguing that a generally pessimistic view is the more realistic view—that is, the more accurate view.

It should come as no surprise that pessimistic responses to life's big existential questions are unpopular. They are unpopular because they are hard to accept. People do not like to get bad news, at least not about themselves or those emotionally close to them. Indeed, denial is a widespread and well-known response to receiving bad news. But humans have an assortment of other coping mechanisms too. For example, they "look on the bright side of life," as Brian (ironically) admonishes us to do in the final scene of Monty Python's *The Life of Brian* as he is being crucified.

People also rationalize, distract themselves, and create uplifting (religious and secular) narratives that either attempt to explain harsh realities or offer hope of a brighter future, if not in this world then in the next. (This world to come, as I show in subsequent chapters, need not be a religious conception. There are entirely secular conceptions of future idyllic states.)

Yet the overwhelming urge to repeat the optimistic messages, especially in the bleakest times, suggests that they are not quite reassuring enough. It is as if the repetition of the “good news” is essential because it is so at odds with the way the world seems to be. While the optimists have answers to life’s big questions, they are not the right ones, or so I shall argue. Their answers are believed, when they are believed, because people so desperately want to believe them, and not because the force of arguments supporting them makes it the case that we must believe them.

Those who do not believe them but who cannot accept the harsh realities remain in a state of bewilderment. They balk at the idea that things could be as bad as the pessimist suggests, but they are also not persuaded by the optimistic spin-doctors.

Life’s big questions are big in the sense that they are momentous. However, contrary to appearances, they are not big in the sense of being unanswerable. It is only that the answers are generally unpalatable. There is no great mystery, but there *is* plenty of horror. It is for this reason that I think that the “human *condition*” is most accurately described as the “human *predicament*.” Nor is it the case that those who are thrust into this predicament can avoid the horror of it. Limited melioration is sometimes possible, but this is the existential equivalent of palliative care. It addresses some symptoms but not the underlying problem and not without costs.⁶

The human predicament and the animal predicament

The human predicament is not entirely unlike the (sentient) animal predicament more generally. These other animals also suffer and they also die. There are questions to be asked about the meaning of their lives, even though most humans (including those concerned with the meaning of human life and even those concerned about animal suffering) rarely worry whether animal lives have meaning.⁷

Thus, in focusing on the human predicament, I do not mean to suggest that we alone find ourselves in a ghastly situation. Many features of our predicament are shared by the other animals with whom we share an evolutionary history. Indeed, there are many species of animals whose predicament is in many ways much worse than humanity's.

Consider the lives of chickens. The vast majority of male chicks are killed within a day or two after hatching because they are useless to the egg industry. Other chickens live a little longer, but this only protracts their suffering. Broiler chickens are fattened quickly and reach slaughter age within about two months. The lifespan of egg-laying hens is measured in years—typically two—rather than months, but the conditions in which the vast majority live are horrific. Their lives are nasty, brutish, and short, but certainly not solitary. Instead, they are packed together in extremely crowded conditions, causing psychological distress and physical problems.

That the predicament of many (nonhuman) animals is worse than that of many humans does not mean that there are not