Discomfort and Moral Impediment

Discomfort and Moral Impediment:

The Human Situation, Radical Bioethics and Procreation

By

Julio Cabrera

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

Discomfort and Moral Impediment:
The Human Situation, Radical Bioethics and Procreation

By Julio Cabrera

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1803-5
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1803-2

CONTENTS

PREFACE

My main goal in this book is to connect two things usually separated in books on ethics: the hard situation of human beings in the world–as described in previous books like *Critique of Affirmative Morality* and other writings of mine–and the very possibility of morality and of a morality of procreation in particular. One of my explicit intentions is to contribute to removing procreation from its usual position as a mere "natural act", or as an obviously ethical act, or even as the most ethical of all acts.

In the first part of the book, I discuss "human situation" (as different from "human condition", the term usually employed in some lines of thought from which I prefer to distance myself), in terms of sensible and moral "frictions" or disturbances regularly affecting human beings, questioning thereby the usual idea of human life as obviously "valuable". The notion of a profound "discomfort" in the mere fact of existing, provoked by these frictions, is crucial to a structural assessment of the value of human life and its impact on many moral (or mortal, in Thomas Nagel's terms) questions like preserving one's own life, taking life from others and giving life.

The book also illustrates the way positive values that we enjoy–with some luck in the social lottery–in our lives, are hard human constructions operating without guarantees, as a defence against the advances of the discomfort of being. In more technical terms, I will refer to this structural discomfort as the "terminality of being", a much more abstract philosophical category than mere "mortality" as we shall see. This basic human situation (composed of discomfort due to the frictions of terminality and the reactive construction of positive values) is essential to a structural–not merely sociological or empirical–assessment of the "value of human life". This is a very primitive situation in which we are already immersed long before we begin to think about it.

In the second part of the book, such a structural dimension of the "human situation" will play a fundamental role in reflecting the amazing lack of ethical care in the act of procreation, where new human beings are thrown into a situation of discomfort and into the field of the arduous creation of positive values. But the profound discomfort argument is not the starting point for the antinatalist argumentation that the reader will find

in the second part of this book. The crucial argument is grounded in the ethical demand of not manipulating other human beings, an attitude that is apparent in any act of procreation.

The arguments concerning the profound discomfort of the "terminality of being" serve to successfully answer the usual argument that manipulation in procreation is morally admissible in virtue of the "great value" of the life offered to the unborn. The double ethical demand of not manipulating and of not giving anyone something that we know to be problematic constitute the two components of the antinatalist argumentation presented minutely in the second part of the book. This line of argument departs from many usual antinatalist argumentations, especially concerning the relations between manipulation and harm and its impact on the morality of abortion.

Most assuredly, a philosophical reflection on birth cannot concentrate exclusively on the issue of procreation. In the last chapters of the book, three further bioethical questions will be advanced in relation to the emergence of discomfort-in-the-world: abortion, sexual morality and education. I illustrate how an anti-abortion argument can emerge within an antinatalist context without producing paradoxes or incongruence. I argue that the ethical problems that procreation has to face are much more serious than those that human sexuality, however heterodox, has to cope with. Lastly, the structural unhappiness of the child, despite his or her empirical "joyfulness", is exposed in connection to the patterns of domination in education and training, giving rise to the problem of biopolitics which has not yet been properly addressed.

From the eighties until the present day, I spent decades talking about the moral problems of procreation and antinatalism, receiving little endorsement from my Latin American colleagues (from Argentine and Brazil). In 2006, David Benatar published *Better Never to Have Been* through Oxford University Press, initiating a lively international polemic around the issues I had been raising all those years. This proved once more that what is not written in English does not exist in the philosophical panorama; languages impose an ontological policy. Benatar's book showed at least that my early negative and antinatalist reflections were not absurd, or else that not even important publishing houses were free from falling into philosophical extravagancies like the immorality of procreation. On the other hand, Benatar's book, in my view, is lacking in a

solid foundation of the pessimist approach to procreation and focuses on a merely empiricist and utilitarian approach.[1]

Concerning the style of the exposition, I adopt some features from the tradition of essay writing, choosing clear and direct delivery of ideas close to ordinary intuitions and without "speculative flights" or abstruse technical language. I would like to follow the philosophical styles exemplified by Arthur Schopenhauer in the German tradition, William James in the North American one (especially in his "essays on popular philosophy"), Spanish thinkers like Ortega y Gasset, Miguel de Unamuno and Fernando Savater, and by Vilém Flusser, who unsuccessfully attempted to introduce this style of thinking in Brazilian philosophy. The reader will find here argumentations as well as images and narratives around the topics discussed, and all of them are essential to the objectives of the present philosophical enterprise. Many allusions to cinema will also be found.

I adopt in this book, with few exceptions, the exclusive masculine use of pronouns with the same attitude that other authors use exclusively feminine ones. This option has not, of course, the same value that it had before the vindication of style equality from women's movements, and it may be inverted in further works. This choice should be, in present times, a stylistic and political option for writers in each case.

[1] Cf. Cabrera, *Quality of human life and non-existence* (Some criticisms of David Benatar's formal and material positions). See also the additional chapter on Benatar in Cabrera, *Crítica de la Moral Afirmativa*.

PART I

ETHICS AND THE HUMAN SITUATION

CHAPTER ONE

THE MINIMAL ETHICAL ARTICULATION (MEA)

My point of departure concerning the characterization of ethics will not present anything new beyond some traditional ideas on ethical morality. This is intentional. For the nature of the reflection intended here, it seems to be convenient not to initially introduce any new notion of ethical morality but rather to maintain a traditional one. For it is precisely the possibility or impossibility of ethics *as traditionally understood* that constitutes the crucial critical question of what I call a "negative ethics", in a sense which will be further clarified. The preliminary critique of affirmative morality intended here could not be made if we were to change right from the start the characterization of what ethics is supposed to be. Let's make this starting point clearer.

First of all, we perceive that we need something to be able to organize minimally our rapports with other human beings, animals and things. Nonetheless, not every organization is an *ethical* organization. Ethics is one form of organization of our relations with other human beings,[1] but it is not the only one. The traditional idea of an *ethical* organization of life is one attempting to consider other human beings' interests and intentions, and not merely our own concerns. In an ethical organization of human relationships, everyone should be initially ready to wrong oneself in the process of considering other people's interests, but in such a way that one's own interests are not annulled or dispensed with but articulated in some way along with those of others.[2]

---

[1] I intentionally do not say "with other persons" and I will generally avoid using the notion of a "person" or of a "human person", expressions tied to some sort of ethical and bioethical discourse. The reasons for this will become more evident in the course of the present inquiry. From the start, I can say that I prefer not using this expression because it has been generally connected to the kind of "value" of human life put in question in the present book.

[2] I am aware that the whole of Nietzsche's philosophical work is devoted to transcending this view of things. According to his "genealogy of morals", no one

"Consideration" will be a relevant category here. The "ethical value" of a human life would depend on the fact of being a *considered* life, in the double sense of "taking into consideration" others' interests and of deserving "to be considered" by others. "To consider" means here to take into account, to attend to, to observe, to listen, to be aware of, without being forced to accept (we could reject an interest after having "considered" it). At the base of this is the obvious idea that we are placed in a situation in which we have desires, expectations and projects that we want to carry out–some of them urgently and with significant emotional involvement–and that we will have to make the effort to balance these longings and aspirations so that they do not hinder the desires, expectations and projects of others, without abandoning our own.

The minimal demand of consideration does not forcibly command us *not to impinge on* the interests of others, much less *to help* others to satisfy their interests. It merely demands that we *consider them* and *submit them* to examination to see if we can obtain a balance between these interests and our own. But here it becomes important *who the other ones are* and *what are their interests*. We live in a situation where human beings can have interests *that do not give consideration to other people's concerns*. The ethical demand requires us to consider the interests of others if these interests do, for their part, consider others' life projects. If they don't, we would not have an ethical obligation to not obstruct them, much less to help them be fulfilled. In doing so, we might be transgressing the minimal ethical demand. We might even have the ethical obligation *not to help* or even *to obstruct* some lines of human action.

It is always a difficult task to obtain a reasonable balance between our interests and the interests of others, but in the case of openly dishonest people (who I will later refer to as "*actively consenting impeded* people", in chapter 5), this balance becomes impossible because these human beings have nothing to offer as a contribution to this balance. Thereby, there is a basic problem with the famous principles of bioethical principlism:[3] neither autonomy, nor beneficence, nor non-maleficence, are basic ethical demands since all of them should be submitted to one more basic test: take into account the interests of those who themselves take into account the interests of others. It wouldn't make any sense to respect the

---

really acts "against oneself," a movement that the "Will to Power" refuses to make (for the same reasons that there are no "disinterested actions" either). However, for now I prefer to maintain Nietzsche's ideas as a horizon of the impossibility of ethics instead of assuming his very strong stance from the beginning.

[3] As exhibited in Tom Beauchamp and James Childress' classic work "Principles of Biomedical Ethics".

autonomy, promote the welfare or even avoid the discomfort of colonizers, tyrants or torturers.[4] Thus, it is essential to always keep these two levels of analysis in mind.

I will resume all this in what I call minimal ethical articulation (MEA). Ethics does not essentially demand to respect the autonomy of others or to not harm them if they themselves do not respect the MEA. Observing this minimal principle precedes respect for autonomy, helping and not harming, because the other could be someone whose autonomy does not deserve to be respected, someone for whose welfare we do not have to fight, someone who does not deserve to be helped, or worse, someone whose interests need to be obstructed. (Think of the interests of Spanish colonizers in subjugating indigenous cultures, the interests of Hitler in invading Poland, or the interests of the United States in interfering in the policies of other countries).

In this way, the principle of justice becomes the prior one, insofar as protecting the autonomy or the welfare of those who do not consider others' interests would not be a fair attitude. The MEA is, in itself, a principle of justice. It may indeed be fair to *not* consider some kinds of human projects. Ethics cannot be understood except by confronting these deadlocks and paradoxes.

Of course, if all humans involved in a situation observe the MEA, our obligations to respect their autonomy and to not harm them become imperative. Failing to observe the demands of the MEA under such conditions would imply resorting to manipulative conduct, or the attribution of damages to others that could be avoided; or even the refusal of help when it could have been offered.[5]

---

[4] This does not immediately mean that we have the right to kill inconsiderate or dishonest people, however offensive or even outrageous their life projects may be. The issue of killing is another crucial topic of ethics and bioethics, in addition to the question of procreation. There are strong motives for defending the idea that even the physical elimination of criminals or tyrants would be an extreme kind of non-consideration that the minimal moral demand would not endorse. But I cannot address this matter here.

[5] My formulation of the MEA has undergone all kinds of revisions through the years as a consequence of criticisms. The version presented here does not coincide with previous formulations that were still stressing the demands of "do not harm" or even "help". Countless objections were presented against this characterization of morality. In order to continue the inquiry and not get bogged down at this stage, it is important to make an effort to capture the essence of the minimal demand. The MEA tries to summarize the idea that we already find in usual European ethical theories. If this minimal ethical demand is found to be problematic in the present context, it must be so considered in all the other contexts where it was employed.

The MEA is not merely a product of agreements or social manoeuvring to organize a community. On the contrary, it consists of something that could correct, challenge or even vigorously cast aside some agreements or social manoeuvres. Thus, it could happen that a group of citizens, or even a single individual, thinks that their community is not adequately considering the interests of others. The MEA is not imposed through the social pressure of the members of a community since this social pressure could be challenged from the point of view of the MEA.

This does not mean that the MEA is a kind of *a priori* structure; it is merely a minimal ethical demand that communities and individuals can understand in very different ways. There will be conflict in many cases, and some party will prevail (in general, the values of the entire community are usually imposed on individuals or small groups). The MEA is not an eternal structure, and there is no reason for us to accept–as individuals or as members of small groups–a specific way of understanding the MEA on behalf of the communities to which we belong. We can defend the minimal ethical demand by challenging the values of our own community.

Thus, ethical demands cannot inertly arise from given forms of social interaction or an intersubjective factual praxis. We do not have any ethical obligation to adapt ourselves to the moral social games in which we were educated, or even to be uncritically "good members" of a community. Ethical morality ought to arise, in any case, from conflicts and discussions between diverse understandings of the MEA as a minimal demand. For example, I might consider the implementation of motor traffic rules to be unfair or even dishonest in the way they are imposed in the community to which I belong. Or I can live in a Eurocentric community that considers indigenous or black forms of life defeated and surpassed, but I can revolt against these ideas and values, as "quixotic" as this insurgence may appear to many people.

I do not have any ethical obligation to adapt to my own culture if I have reason to think that constituting a community in such a way is wrong. There is no reason why I have to develop my life from the acculturation processes that I received as a child, starting from my asymmetrical birth. Of course, I am legally bound by rules and laws, and I could be punished for challenging them (and rewarded or tolerated while rigorously observing them). I can be considered a "violator" of some law or even a criminal in virtue of some established rules, but never anti-ethical or

---

The MEA essentially coincides with Adela Cortina's idea of a "minimal ethics," in the sense of an ethics without elevated deontological or hedonist demands, which seeks out equality and consideration of the interests of all beyond merely factual "pacts" (Cf. Cortina, Ética Mínima: Introducción a la filosofía práctica, 284-287).

immoral on the grounds of that. However, I will, of course, have to substantiate my disobedience or even my rebellion against the rules that I am ready to see as unfair.

Ethical morality should be, but usually is not, the product of an analysis and criticism, and even of a challenge (but hardly ever of a totally radical breakdown) of the formation that we received in a unilateral and authoritarian way. It should not be something that we must simply receive and reproduce. We are forced to participate in diverse intersubjective praxes where arguments are presented and behaviours are developed. But these praxes do not consist of the mere absorption and observance of what was transmitted by our ancestors (genitors, professors, governors). We can resist integration into a community that favours some specific individuals and does not consider all people equally.

Therefore, censuring the behaviour of someone who is violating some norm is justified if the censuring community is observing the MEA. In a community of criminals, the intersubjective game of norms, the mechanisms of censorships, the feelings of indignation, etc., could work perfectly well. Even criminals censure others for not observing the rules that they themselves impose for their intersubjective practices. Communities need to presuppose some minimal sense of ethical morality from the onset (and that is precisely what the MEA aims to provide), because that morality cannot arise from the mere fact that communities, as cohesive and well organized as they may be, are organized around values that we can–and very often should–contest. These are some of the trivialities around ethical morality that we need in order to pursue our inquiry regarding the value of human life and the morality of procreation.

The Role of Feelings and Sympathy in Ethics

The disposition to take into consideration other people's interests and not only our own, and the refusal of manipulation, does not identify with any kind of ethical theory in particular, but points to an elementary articulation without which there would simply not be ethics at all.[6] This seems to be

[6] At least in a Western sense, ethical articulations have many ways of being thought up and characterized, for example, from the perspective of American Indians, African and Eastern universes and forms of life. Introducing these other articulations of ethical morality in a work like this would modify its entire structure. But it becomes imperative to attend to all that multiplicity in further works about ethical matters. The MEA attempts a rather broad formulation of an ethical demand: it is inconceivable to see practices like persecution, arbitrary loss of freedom or discrimination as being ethical in any plausible sense. Nevertheless,

the minimal articulation dividing human actions and attitudes into categories of right and wrong, following the criterion of consideration of others' interests (when they do the same to others). My point here does not seem controversial. We cannot accept as "ethical" any theory which prescribes that only self-interests should be taken into consideration. Despite occasionally appearing in the literature, I do not accept the consistency of the expression "selfish ethics".[7]

But this minimal ethical demand is not purely intellectual either; it involves affections; it attends to the demands of ethical theories of feelings in the style of Adam Smith and Hume. This will be important later on when we address ethical questions that provoke strong feelings, such as procreation, abortion and sexuality. I do not at all assume that this minimal notion of ethics, which we will use throughout this text, is something purely intellectual and free from feelings. On the contrary, the question of feelings is extremely relevant and is always taken into account.[8]

The demand for consideration of others always involves an emotional appeal that has to be attended to. But it does not seem reasonable to accept that a human action or attitude ought to be considered ethically correct just because people feel it is so, not even when it is felt as such by the majority or by the entire community. The indignation and rejection that a member of a certain community may feel when confronted with the actions of another member, or the shame someone may feel when called to account, are not *per se* ethical reactions. These feelings can altogether exist in a community of criminals. The leader of a gang may get very angry with a younger gangster's inefficiency in threatening an enemy, and in turn, the youngster may feel ashamed for not being able to satisfy the expectations of his chief, or his criminal colleagues. In order to discard this case, we might have to add something as: "indignation and shame have to be *ethical* feelings and occur within an *ethical* community". But in order to avoid circularity, we must accept that feelings alone are not enough to

---

this formulation of the ethical demand is not entirely "objective", but it is always mediated by social organizations and practices. What we see from the outside as "discrimination" could very well be seen differently from the perspective of the individuals and groups living these practices.

[7] And even this sort of ethics sustains a version of the consideration of others since it deals with some kind of rational egotism. I cannot develop this further here.

[8] See Cabrera, *Cine: 100 años de Filosofía*, "Introduction". In my writings on film and philosophy, I had insistently maintained that in all philosophical argumentation there is both a logical and an emotional (or "pathic") element, which led me to coin the technical term "logopathic" to express this particular kind of concept formation. In order to be adequately captured, a philosophical idea also needs to be felt and not merely understood.

characterize ethical morality. There has to be an added non-sentimental criterion that differentiates between ethical and unethical feelings. Feelings in themselves are neither "ethical" nor "unethical".

A feeling can be crucial for driving someone towards ethical consideration for others, but the mere presence of a feeling, even if felt by the whole society we belong to, does not make an action ethical. That an entire community, specifically the kind in which we grew up, maintains certain positive feelings of acceptance towards some practices (say, marriage and procreation) or negative feelings of rejection towards others (like suicide or homosexuality) does not prove the *ethical* or *unethical* character of these practices. That the members of the community into which I was fortuitously and asymmetrically placed at my birth, display indignation at an action I commit, does not prove that I have done something ethically wrong, or that their indignation is something that should make me feel ashamed. There is no reason why, in evaluating human practices, I must accept the standard feelings of the community in which I am situated due to the radical contingency of my birth.

Sympathy cannot, therefore, be part of the characterization of the minimal ethical demand since sympathy is not ethical in itself. We can sympathize with monstrosities. There will be ethical sympathies and unethical ones, and that indicates that some previous understanding of ethics should be presupposed prior to sympathy. It is not of much use to point to the "natural" character of sympathy. If sympathy is a natural emotion that everyone experiences, this feeling still needs to be stimulated and trained in order for it to function ethically. We will not only have to cultivate sympathies but also channel them towards ethically adequate objects, to objects that *deserve* our sympathy. Sympathy alone will not enable us to make *ethical* choices.

On the other hand, if sympathy is a "natural" feeling, then so too are antipathy and apathy. Ethics is concerned with the consideration of others; moreover, what of those for whom we do not feel any sympathy, or we feel the opposite, or feel nothing at all? Are they not worthy of ethical consideration? We must grant feelings an indispensable place in the observance of ethical demands, positing them as essential reinforcement of ethics; but *per se* they will not make an action or attitude ethical. Sympathy can be part of a methodology of ethical formation or application through fomentation and exercise so that feelings can reinforce ethics without constituting it. Sympathy can help consolidate an ethics previously conceived in terms that cannot be purely sympathetic.

Some perverse systems like the Spanish conquest, Nazism or a community of delinquents can generate their own rules of reciprocity,

rewards, remunerations, feelings of indignation and guilt, and even virtues. It should be clearly known whether the objects of an education *deserve* ethical approval rather than merely adhering to some well-established social pacts. Once something is recognized as being right, in the sense of the MEA, it can be observed with sympathy. Some people or human groups could understand rightness in an intellectual way, others prefer an emotional bias, but in either case, the ethical character of actions and attitudes should be determined beforehand.[9]

[9] Everything that was said up to now of the ethical demand applies exclusively to human beings since it cannot be expected of non-human animals or things that they consider our interests. When we consider moral attitudes with respect to animals or things, we do it as a function of the consideration of human interests. Maybe with non-human animals, affections acquire another value. This question of attitudes towards animals is very important and deserves special attention.

CHAPTER TWO

HUMAN LIFE AND DISCOMFORT (THE NON-STRUCTURAL ARGUMENTS)

In European theories of ethics[1], something like a "value of human life" in the sense of a positive value (sensible and moral) is never radically denied or rejected. This idea functions like a self-evident truth despite the disagreements regarding better formulations (not all the defenders of this crucial idea believe, for example, in an "intrinsic" or "innate" value of humans, but in a historically developed human value). In an ethical-negative line of thought, as pursued in the present book, the question of a positive value of human life (the idea of human life being something evidently good), *is not a self-evident truth but rather something that needs to be argued and defended in a slow and careful process of argumentation*. That this positive value of human life could be proven by argument is not excluded as a possibility; what is being denied is only its presumed "obvious" character. That is so because many adverse elements arise when this slow and careful consideration in favour of human life is assumed seriously, without recourse to wishful thinking or metaphysical or religious assumptions.

Given that this slow and careful argumentation in favour of the value of human life has not been arrived at (and we can have, as we'll see, many motives for thinking that it will take some time), I will move in the opposite direction, of trying to present arguments in favour of the thesis that human life carries something like an initial structural *disadvantage.* I will argue in favour of the possibility of showing that human life *initially* presents a valueless character or a "lack of value", not in the agnostic

[1] I do not pretend to be parochial in this denomination, but merely refer to the fact that our Latin-American educational establishments exclusively import ethical theories from hegemonic European countries and make omission of vernacular thinkers. I use "European" with the same emphasis that Nietzsche spoke of a "European nihilism" and Husserl of a "crisis of European sciences."

sense of not being "good or bad"[2] but in the sense of carrying from the outset an *adverse value,* at least for beings like human beings. (In fact, there is an ambiguity in the use of the expression "x lacks value". This can mean that x has no value at all, either positive or negative; or it can be read as meaning that x has a negative value, as in the sentence "your novel *does not have any value*" meaning that it has a *negative* value. It will be clear in the following that when I maintain that human life "lacks value", I use the second alternative).

As an argumentation strategy, I start with the sequence of non-structural arguments, proceeding from the weaker to the stronger ones (although this sequence is conjectural, and the reader may disagree).

1) *The Daily Suffering Argument*. Humans of diverse societies and social classes acknowledge in their speech and attitudes that life is something bad, in the sense that it involves discomfort.

Humans live their lives amidst discomfort and suffering. Beginning with the most trivial, the vast majority of the world's population has to toil to earn food and the minimal conditions necessary to continue living and is forced to perform tasks or assume attitudes that they wouldn't like to confront. All social classes are regularly plagued by daily afflictions like headaches, colds, migraines, indigestions, stomach ache, toothache, backaches, fluctuation of temperature, heartburn, nausea, not to speak of the continuous threat of a serious illness.[3]

Daily life is a place of effort, struggle, hurry, worry, unease and nervousness, and not just in big cities; in the country, we find tediousness, misery, solitude, family violence and environmental concerns. Wealthy human beings have multiple preoccupations derived from having a lot of money: they will have to manage it, take care that it does not devalue, constantly have to take precautions to prevent robbery, spend a lot on security, ward off predatory friendships, and take care of tedious illnesses and overindulgence that create neuroses and manias particular to the wealthy classes.

Humans complain almost permanently about discomfort (physical, economic, familial, social) and frequently produce sentences like: "We are

[2] We should consider this traditional terminology of "good" and "bad" as part of an ephemeral vocabulary, just like the duality "positive-negative" (even in the expression "negative ethics"). "Good" and "bad" will be replaced by the notions of "welfare" and "discomfort" in the following steps of the argumentation.

[3] See Benatar, *Better never to have been*; Benatar and Wasserman, *Debating procreation*. It is hard at this point to do better than Benatar in the exhaustive listing of our daily calamities.

born to suffer", "Life is a valley of tears", "Hell is here on earth", expressions that indicate the malaise and discomfort that regularly accompany daily life. It is true that, quite often, they also manifest happiness and contentedness, but, according to this argument, such manifestations are very much derived from the great efforts that humans are permanently forced to make in order to confront the discomforts of life. Thus, they try to laugh or smile in the face of adversities, because, as they say, "Otherwise it is *even* worse". A courageous attitude is not a symptom that things "are going well" but may show precisely the contrary: adversity is so great that we are forced to "lighten up" in order to cope with it better (as they say in Brazil: "*rir para não chorar*").[4] Even expressions that are used to praise life include an element of discomfort ("in *spite* of it all*",* "it was worth the *trouble*").

Happy moments in human life are brief, fleeting, ephemeral and come at a high cost (illnesses, enmities, financial problems). To enjoy a trip and see something pleasant, we might have to overcome all kinds of natural and human obstacles (apart from serious accidents, unexpected sicknesses, robberies and even greater woes that arise on trips, there are many inflicted by other human beings, like customs agents that take particular pleasure in delaying us and ruining our trip, or aggressive police officers, greedy merchants, and so on).

Even as regards what people consider life's "big moments" (childbirth, a love affair, an unforgettable trip, a big commercial or professional success) are literally ripped out from a conglomerate of unpleasant circumstances and situations. Moreover, approximately seventy percent of the world's population does not even have access to most of these "big moments of happiness", and when they do (in the case of childbirth), these moments appear to be mired in countless difficulties and penuries of all kinds. A sincere phenomenology of attitudes and utterances would show that human life is lived in struggle and conflict; an immense effort is spent to get a few moments of happiness or comfort, always in a state of unfairness, penury and suffering. Of course, in this phenomenology, we also encounter a lot of mechanisms to disguise and conceal our miseries. Suffering and frustrations are concealed and we tend merely to see or concentrate on the misfortunes of others while exaggerating our small achievements.

I have a basic objection against this line of argument on the "lack of value" of human life. It is merely empirical and it compels us to enter into a very complicated and controversial calculation of "goods" and "evils"

[4] Laughing so that we don't cry.

and to verify if the goods "exceed the number" of the evils or vice versa, by placing everything on a scale. This line of argument is developed in a very problematic and subjective domain, for everything comes to depend on the weight that people give to their experiences, on what they understand as "big moments", and so on. Besides, some Marxist sociologists could allege that this description of misfortunes corresponds only to the capitalist way of life. *A much stronger argument on the initial valueless character of human life has to point to structural features*. It cannot be grounded on mere calculations. It has to show clearly that *even a life with a clear predominance of goods over evils would not have any structural value*. This is what the "argument of profound discomfort" or "structural argument" will subsequently aim to prove later. But, at the moment, we continue with the non-structural arguments.[5]

2) *The Philosophers' Dark Vision Argument*. Throughout the course of the history of European thought, philosophers of the most diverse persuasions have always shown human life as something bad and the world as an inhospitable place.

This is the Nietzschean view of the history of philosophy as depreciation and slandering of life. From Hesiod and Plato, through Plotinus, Augustine, Anselm, Pascal, and up to German Idealism, the world has been pictured as a place of suffering and evil, especially within the Neoplatonist scheme that leads to Hegel and even to Marx. According to this scheme, something very valuable was lost, and now we have to get it back by practising some moral way of life; we must struggle, amidst suffering and obstacles, in search of some sort of salvation.

In almost all cases, the "lack of value" of human life has been formulated upon metaphysical and religious foundations. It is worth noting that even those authors who defend "human dignity" and different kinds of "humanism", accepting the possibility of a "higher" mode of living or some effective practice of moral values (i.e. thinkers who are not sceptics, nihilists or agnostics), even they have presented human life as a sombre enterprise, full of risks and evil, where morality and plenitude are exotic

[5] This is a kind of empirical pessimism that I find in some of the antinatalist literature, including David Benatar's 2006 book (*Better never to have been*), and that I have criticized in the article mentioned in footnote 1 of the preface, and in the new edition (2014) of *Crítica de la Moral Afirmativa*, part IV, section 4: "David Benatar and the Limits of Empirical Pessimism". In fact, I find in the literature a mixture of empirical and structural elements that it is important to distinguish clearly in order to avoid some frequent social and political criticisms against pessimism.

flowers, and where moral force is mandatory in order to compensate for a world full of misery, infamy and perdition. It seems obvious that a world presented as a place of atonement, punishment and vindication is not a good place, but in any case, it is a place that has to be "turned good" through our own efforts.

3) *The "Better World" Argument*. If human life were something good, humans would not have throughout history imagined better worlds through religion and arts.

Since the beginning of time, humans have imagined worlds transcending our own; worlds of deities, sheer happiness, light, rewards, harmony, heroism, adventure; worlds where injustices are healed, goodness rewarded, evil punished, and life enjoyed. However, if life were sufficiently good, why would humans have this urgent need to imagine better worlds? Works of art, music, painting, theatre and film present everything that humans do not find in life, all of the beauty, harmony, power and noble tragedy, of which they are deprived in their real lives. Why would humans conjure up other lives if their own were bearable? Humans weave dreams to compensate for the frustrations of real life. We could not go on with our lives without the magic of arts and religions. It would seem that a world which imperatively needs to be transcended is not satisfactory enough, but it merely supplies the bricks for building better worlds.

One could retort that the fact that humans need better worlds does not imply that our world is bad; it could be good, and religion and arts make it *still better*. But a phenomenology of attitudes shows that humans consult churches, places of self-help and therapists in an attitude of profound despair, clamouring for help rather than merely seeking to "complement" their already pleasant lives. Consider "salvation". How can a life that we must save ourselves from be good? Humans dive into fantasy worlds eagerly unfolded by the arts (the "amusement" described by Pascal as well as the powerful "escapisms" of today are forms of fun, allowing us to flee our arduous, demanding, boring, unpleasant and unsatisfactory lives). The desire for transcendence (religion) and for indulgence in fantasy (arts) does not appear in this phenomenology as a luxury which humans would look for just as an optional gratification, but as a pressing need for satisfaction that cannot be deferred, without which life would be unendurable. Do not the profusion of self-help books[6] and the anxious

[6] Including suicidal self-help literature: two books explaining how to exit from life without pain: Guillon, and Yves Le Bonniec, *Suicide, mode d'emploi*; and Humphry, *Final Exit*, were worldwide bestsellers.

demand for them show a profound despair in the face of an uncomfortable and disturbing life?[7] A life that so badly needs another world to compensate for its shortcomings cannot be a good and self-sufficient one. Such a life is just bearable or supportable at best.

One can reply that religions and the arts also present suffering and desolation, and not just good things. But the sufferings and tragedies provided by religions and arts have two highly compensatory features. In the case of religions, suffering and tragedy have a sense and a purpose. One suffers in the hope of attaining something good, noble or redemptive. The arts display suffering that can be contemplated from the comfortable position of a spectator (even an emotionally involved one), as magically "controlled" suffering, cathartic and pleasant. Suffering with a purpose (religions) and contemplated sufferings (arts) are two powerful symbolic devices that make suffering appear to be apparently controlled.

4) *The Argument of the Dead and the Replacement of Loved Ones*. Being irreplaceable or difficult to replace is usually a plausible criterion–albeit not unique or exclusive–for something or someone to be valuable. The more valuable a thing or human is, the less easily it can be replaced. However, usual human attitudes towards the dead and other "losses" of so-called loved ones show that one human life is not valuable enough, because it can always be replaced, with greater or lesser ease.

A sign of the value of a thing or human can be measured by its coefficient of substitution: the more valuable, the more irreplaceable. This does not point towards mere commercial exchange values. Also in the case of the death of our loved ones, we frequently speak of "irreparable loss", in the sense of the impossibility of substitution (e.g. couples that lose a small child and do not want to have another, feeling that death robbed them of something that can never be replaced). This seems like strong evidence of the immense value of what was lost. We also often speak of a particular work of art as "irreplaceable" (if a Van Gogh were damaged, there would never be another to take its place). Thus, the possibility of substitution can be a reasonable parameter of being valuable (although, of course, not an absolute one).

Let's now observe human behaviour in our societies with respect to the dead and "losses" of loved ones in general. A human being can be very loved and valued while alive, as absolutely different from all others and

[7] This does not seem to constitute a mere modern phenomenon since the Greek writers of tragedies and Seneca already talked about similar despairs in their writings; this does not mean that Seneca was ahead of his time about life in his thoughts but that life and its discomfort was prior to Seneca's time.

therefore irreplaceable. But when that human being dies, the others who surrounded him or her will lament and cry for some time, but slowly, little by little, they will accept it, put their loss behind them and forget. A husband that loses his wife (not even only a young one) will remarry, have kids, and "rebuild his life", so they say, since, as we all know, "life must go on". Society will also encourage him to forget and "move on with his life", because "one cannot weep forever". And if this human continues to grieve his loss for one whole year, he will be taken to a psychologist. In positions of employment, when someone loses a loved one, he gets a maximum of one week off to cry his heart out and quickly return to his daily activities. A week is the exactly stipulated period of time that one needs, in the eyes of the labour market, to honour the value of the one without whom we believe we cannot continue living.

In societies like ours, humans seem to have a powerful capacity for substitution. No one is so unique that he or she cannot be traded or negotiated. However, if what is valuable is connected to what is irreplaceable or difficult to replace, those who forget the dead and replace them–more or less quickly–would be admitting that the value of the lost loved one existed while he or she was alive and present, but that value has now been surpassed by the very flow of life. Thus, there is nothing more one can do in terms of investment in the value of the lost human being, besides evoking particular memories from time to time–with lesser and lesser frequency–until they totally disappear with the passing of time.

However, if the value of a human being is something settled by others that can be removed afterwards (like a divestment), it means that human beings did not properly possess any intrinsic, internal or structural positive value but only the value that other humans accorded him when he was alive. Had a human being had an internal value, he would be *totally irreplaceable*. He could not simply be forgotten; nostalgia and longing for him would be unbearable and would destroy the close survivors (our dead would kill us as in some of Edgar Allan Poe's bleak short stories). An ethics that really considers human beings to be irreplaceable should include the severe moral imperative to *never forget the dead*, thereby establishing a kind of endless mourning (like in the play *La casa de Bernarda Alba* by Federico García Lorca).

It seems then that we are born without any positive value, and when we die, we lose the positive value accumulated throughout our lives by our own actions and by the actions of others. When someone dies, their value is played out, the curtain falls. If the deceased still retains some value for a time, it will be by the stubborn investment of his survivors, who will die one day and they will also be forgotten.

Remark number 1

There is a strong resistance in discussions on this matter to accept that human beings behave in the manner I have just described, forgetting their dead more or less quickly and forging ahead. It is very difficult to prove an empirical thesis because one would have to produce several kinds of tests, conduct interviews and explore diversified observations. In my experience over the course of many years and in many different countries, I have not seen humans that have been afflicted and paralyzed for years and years by the loss of someone, to the point of totally losing their ability to work, have sexual relations and continue living life with all its difficulties. I have only seen this in movies. It seems to me a fact of experience that nature supplies a powerful impulse to continue in spite of losses, and that society makes an effort to help us recuperate, as soon as possible, the motivation for forging ahead. (In fact, others can even become irritated, worried or derisory if we continue mourning a loved one after one or two years).

It could also be argued that there are very few people that do not manage to continue living after a loss or even kill themselves as a consequence of losing someone (like the great French actor, Charles Boyer, who committed suicide after losing his wife without whom he could not find a meaning for his life). It seems to me that such cases are highly exceptional (and seen by many as pathological). If the capacity for replacement is accepted as a criterion of value (something that we are not forced to accept), humans would not have enough value so as to not be forgotten, and not be replaced with other humans in a time that can be very short. This shows, in sound informal logic (it's obvious that it is not a deductive inference!) that human lives do not have value in themselves but merely the value that other human beings invest and divest in them throughout their mutual relationships until one of them dies.[8]

[8] It is usually repeated in books on ethics that "people are not replaceable", but rarely do their authors talk about the everyday behaviours in which humans are in fact replaced when they leave. For example, Marcia Baron affirms that it would be praiseworthy for someone to volunteer to replace the tulips that have died with new ones, though it would be a sick joke for a man that has killed two people to say he is ready to replace them with the children his wife is about to give birth to. The reason for this is that "[…] respect for humanity implies that people are not replaceable. Losing one person is not compensated by producing another" (Baron, "Kantian Ethics", 24-25). But if this were really the case, how can we explain the behaviour of people that "remake their lives", with society's full consent and even encouragement, after they lose a loved one? The irreplaceable character of someone has to be constructed through a powerful invention of values. In a footnote, Baron still admits that it can be acceptable to replace people as

Remark number 2

In the movie *The Train* (John Frankenheimer), the museum director says to the members of the French resistance, referring to famous artworks that had been looted by the Nazis: "Those paintings are irreplaceable". The leader of the French resistance replies: "I lost many men in these battles. They too, like the paintings, are irreplaceable". But, in a certain sense, the irreplaceable character of paintings (and of artworks in general) is literal. Nothing can replace a Van Gogh. In the case of humans, even though the majority of people place human life above the conservation of a mere painting, it is simply false that humans are irreplaceable, according to the preceding arguments, while it is literally true that a Van Gogh cannot be replaced by a Gauguin or a Picasso or by anything at all. This would seem to strengthen the thesis that humans are capable of creating objects more valuable than themselves, in the sense of them being more irreplaceable.

Of course, we could also consider Van Gogh himself to be irreplaceable in the sense that, had he died before painting his more famous works, no one else could have replaced him (just like a great leader of the French resistance could be considered irreplaceable for his key role in war operations). But even in these cases, it would not be totally true that these humans are literally irreplaceable (there will be other painters and other leaders). Had Picasso died before painting *Guernica*, we would have never known the dimension of the loss that was Picasso's death. Thus, it would be somewhat absurd to say now, "Had Picasso not died, he wouldn't have painted *Guernica*". However, once he painted it, Guernica becomes irreplaceable in a way that Picasso could never be.[9]

5) *The Acknowledgement Argument*. If human life, in fact, had a structural positive value in itself, humans would not so eagerly need for this value to be acknowledged and recognized by other humans.

---

consumers, workers, soldiers, progenitors, etc., for example after a devastating war. She says that this does not mean that we consider disappeared people as replaceable, but that we make these substitutions for society to carry on. What I ask in the line of argument here assumed, in a radical bias not carried forward by Baron, is if the mere intentionality of "continuing to live" after the loss of supposedly irreplaceable human beings is sometimes ethically justified.

[9] In his famous polemics with Derrida, John Searle suggested that he had himself developed the theory of speech acts that J. L. Austin would have written if he hadn't died prematurely. In his reply, Derrida points to the impossibility of knowing this and even to the absurdity of such a claim.

In personal relationships of love and affection as much as in work and professional activities, *we have a very strong and urgent need to be acknowledged by others*. We want to be loved, admired, appreciated, respected and praised. From a very young age, we need a caress, a compliment, a word of encouragement or an institutional reward. Not only do we need to be praised for what we *do* or *have* but also for what we *are*. We have a tremendous need to be acknowledged *for our own being*, not just in what we do or possess.

However, one can infer (informally) from the fact that we have a great need for others *to give value* to our own being, that we do not actually have this value, or that we do not have enough of it so that we urgently need to receive it from others and confirm it frequently. If we had this value firmly and certainly, why are we so anguished when we do not expressly obtain this acknowledgement? If we were internally or intrinsically valuable, we should have complete consciousness of our value without needing external acknowledgement. It would be a property that nothing could diminish. But, on the contrary, it seems that our value strongly depends on others valorizing us, as if, without such acknowledgement, we were nothing at all. This seems to show that our being is not something inherently valuable, but we need constant external valorization for it.

Of course, the value that I give to myself plays an important role in this process, the feeling of self-worth and self-respect without which I could not survive. However, it seems that this powerful mechanism of self-valorization is never completely satisfied. We always need others to ratify this value, and if they do not consider us valuable, we hesitate in giving value to ourselves. When a human relationship ends, when a couple separates, when we stop loving or being loved, we lose value. The effort that the other made to give us value is exhausted. A divestment occurs and I am helplessly bereft of the indispensable valorization of others which is now refused. Our positive value is not structural or intrinsic but something that depends constantly on the support of social relationships. Rather than being acknowledged as having value, we come to have a value for being acknowledged.

Remark number 1

It is important for the following considerations, especially in connection to the phenomenon of “moral impediment”, to understand that humans are here considered as certain mechanisms that constantly strive, sometimes anxiously, to give themselves a value. When two humans establish a

relationship, two mechanisms of this sort meet and enter into conflict, because it's very difficult to avoid the risk of injuring or wounding others' attempts at self-valorization, or not being affected by hate or disdain of those whom, however unintentionally, we injure, wound or diminish in our own arduous task of "giving value to ourselves".

The search for family, friends, allies, readers, admirers, and so forth, constitutes an attempt to surround oneself with humans that constantly ratify–unconditionally, if possible–our value. A "betrayal" then occurs when one of the members of this selected group, for some reason or other, refuses to continue participating in the social construction of my value. All these phenomena would not occur if our value were something internal or intrinsic, existing by itself, certain and not in need of constant acknowledgement and ratification (given the crucial relevance of this point, I will return to it many times throughout the present inquiry).

Remark number 2

It is simple to find counter-arguments for *all* of the non-structural arguments listed above. For example, against the "better world argument", one could say that the kind of people who turn to church or self-help books in despair are sick and depressive people in need of medical attention, that they are exceptions and do not represent the majority of humankind. It would be absurd to maintain that *all* of humanity falls into this category of anguished people. This would be a fallacy of hasty generalization. The difficulties of adapting to life's problems do not constitute anything fatal or unavoidable.

One could always counter the "replacement argument" by saying that just because people remarry and have other children, it does not follow that they do not ascribe value to people that have died. We can very well restart our life, while still considering the deceased person as irreplaceable. There would have to be an adjustment to the meaning of the term "replaceable". Further, it could always be said against the "acknowledgement argument" that the fact that people need the acknowledgement of others does not imply that they do not have any intrinsic value. We can conceive an intrinsic value that becomes constituted socially, as it comes into contact with the practices of acknowledgement. The notions of "intrinsic" and "acknowledgement" would have to be revised; maybe these notions are too restrictive in the preceding argumentation.

But the question does not stop there. If my interlocutor is not dead, seriously injured or locked up and unable to speak, he will always have