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What Cosmic Nihilism Contributes to Benatar's Case Against Procreation

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Research Article

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Abstract

David Benatar's earlier writings, and several reconstructions of them, suggest that the absence of cosmic meaning adds a consideration against procreation. His 2022 reply instead places meaninglessness 'on the back of life's poor quality': substantial meaning might mitigate life's burdens or justify procreation despite them. This article argues that the clarification is sound but limited. Benatar has not shown that cosmic meaninglessness introduces a distinct bad within a created life or supplies a pro tanto reason against creation independent of the burdens to which meaning was offered as a response. Missing compensation and missing justification can nevertheless be verdict-changing because they leave those burdens unanswered. A separate norm might also make cosmic meaning a necessary condition of permissible creation, but Benatar's discussion does not establish such a norm. Cosmic nihilism can therefore close a defence without itself adding a further burden.

1 Introduction

Benatar's writings support two readings of the relation between cosmic meaninglessness and antinatalism. His earlier formulations describe the absence of cosmic meaning as a serious deficit and connect it with the case against procreation. On an additive reading, meaninglessness counts against creation alongside suffering, loss, decline, brevity and death. In his 2022 response to critics, Benatar rejects that reading. He says that, insofar as meaninglessness supports antinatalism, it does so 'on the back of life's poor quality': ultimate, or even great, meaning might mitigate that quality or help justify procreation despite it, but no such meaning is available (Benatar 2022, 128, 130–131). Throughout, cosmic nihilism denotes only the absence of substantial cosmic or ultimate meaning, not the stronger thesis that there are no objective values or reasons.

The clarification leaves the normative role of the cosmic premise unsettled. Benatar continues to call the absence of substantial meaning 'very bad' and tragic, to say that ultimate meaning would significantly mitigate the human predicament, and to compare its absence with the absence of medical treatment (Benatar 2022, 129–131). These claims may concern different things. Meaninglessness might be a bad within a life, aggravate an existing burden, remove a possible compensation, remove a possible justification, or violate a separate condition of permissible creation. The distinctions matter because each claim has different grounds and requires different evidence.

A simple comparison exposes the inferential gap. Let C + be an outcome in which a life with substantial cosmic meaning is created, C0 an otherwise comparable outcome in which a life without it is created, and N an outcome in which no life is created. Here '>' represents the relevant evaluative or choice ranking; the argument does not assume that every person-affecting theory permits a complete comparison with non-creation. Benatar's claims about improvement and mitigation support C + > C0. They do not determine the relation between C0 and N. C + > C0 is compatible with C0 being better than N, worse than N, equal to N, or incomparable with it. The value that cosmic meaning would add therefore does not by itself fix a procreative threshold.

The article defends a source-sensitive conclusion. Benatar has not shown that cosmic meaninglessness introduces either a distinct bad within C0 or a pro tanto reason against creation whose ground is independent of the familiar burdens to which meaning was proposed as a response. If cosmic meaning would compensate for those burdens or justify imposing them, its absence may still determine the all-things-considered verdict by leaving the original objection unanswered. Nor does the argument exclude a deontic theory on which cosmic meaning is independently required for permissible creation. It claims only that such a requirement cannot be derived from the fact that C+ would be better than C0. Metz and Lee dispute the badness attributed to meaninglessness itself (Metz 2022, 42–48; Lee 2023, 185–198). The narrower question here is what follows even if cosmic meaning would be a great good.

2 From the Additive Reading to Benatar's 2022 Clarification

Benatar's earlier writings make the additive interpretation reasonable. He distinguishes meaning available from personal, familial, communal and human perspectives from meaning available from the cosmic perspective. Human projects can matter to individuals and communities while failing to affect the universe significantly across space and time, fulfil a cosmic purpose, or provide an ultimate point to the human enterprise. In The Human Predicament, he calls the absence of cosmic meaning bad and a serious deficit, and links the struggle for meaning and the attempt to ward off suffering to the conclusion that we ought not to procreate (Benatar 2017, 60–63, 207–208).

Metz reconstructs the position as an additive argument: cosmic meaning is the most important kind of meaning, human lives necessarily lack it, and the lack is sufficiently bad to provide some moral reason not to create a person (Metz 2022, 38–42). Benatar had also argued that a life without such meaning lacks an important objective good and that our lives are less good because they do not matter from the perspective of the universe (Benatar 2006, 82–83). Lougheed likewise treats the lack as a harm and presents Metz's standardised argument as moving from that bad to a moral reason not to create a life lacking cosmic meaning (Lougheed 2025, 250–251, 260–261). The additive reading is therefore not a simple misdescription of Benatar's published claims.

Lee reaches a similar negative verdict through a different route. On his Kantian account, neither life's evolutionary origin nor humanity's limited effect on the universe is a reason to judge human lives overall bad. A good life depends primarily on the satisfactory pursuit and achievement of permissible ends rather than on cosmic impact (Lee 2023, 186–187). This challenges an evaluative premise of the additive reading, but it does not identify the role that the missing good plays in Benatar's later argument.

Benatar's 2022 response narrows his earlier formulations. He rejects treating cosmic meaninglessness as a disvalue isolated from life's familiar harms and says that its antinatalist relevance arises 'on the back of life's poor quality'. No ultimate, or even great, meaning can be invoked to justify procreation in the face of that quality (Benatar 2022, 128). He later adds that absent cosmic benefits are difficult to disentangle from actual burdens and that ultimate meaning would significantly mitigate, though not eliminate, the human predicament (Benatar 2022, 130–131). Read charitably, these claims place cosmic

meaning in a responsive role: it would improve a burdened life or answer an objection to creating it. The clarification preserves the practical relevance of cosmic nihilism, but it does not show that the missing response is itself another burden.

That distinction has an immediate dialectical use. A defence of procreation might appeal to a beneficent cosmic order, participation in an ultimately valuable purpose, final restoration, or an achievement of enduring cosmic value. If such a feature would compensate for suffering or justify exposing a person to it, cosmic nihilism excludes that defence. Yet Benatar's remaining language of badness, mitigation and pointlessness leaves open whether he also intends a stronger claim. Lougheed shows that an unavailable good may remain an appropriate object of regret. Regret at a foregone improvement, however, does not establish that the absence favours non-creation over creation or that it should be counted independently of the burden the improvement would have answered.

3 Normative Roles and the Source of Reasons

The term 'weight' can obscure the issue unless its level is specified. Welfare badness, reasons against an act, wrong-making features and conditions of permission are not units on a single scale. A welfare deficit may ground a reason against creation; a deontic fact may ground a reason without lowering the created person's welfare. The claim at issue is therefore not that every relevant consideration must be commensurable. It is that a consideration counts as a distinct pro tanto reason only when its normative ground is not merely the continued presence of an original burden together with the failure of a proposed response to it.

Independent disvalue and aggravation can satisfy that condition. Independent disvalue would add a bad within the created life or a wrong-making feature of creation. Aggravation would make an existing burden worse, add a further harm connected with it, or increase the gravity of the act that imposes it. Missing compensation and missing justification have a different structure. Compensation supplies value that offsets a burden; justification permits an act despite a reason against it. When either response is unavailable, the burden remains decisive or undefeated. The absence can alter the verdict without becoming a second ground of objection.

A burdensome medical treatment illustrates the point. A therapeutic benefit may outweigh the treatment's pain and risk. If the benefit is absent, those burdens remain and the treatment may be impermissible. Describing the outcome as lacking the benefit is accurate, but counting the same absence again as an additional medical burden would duplicate its role. Justification differs from compensation but yields the same structural lesson. An emergency may justify breaking a promise without benefiting the promisee. When there is no emergency, the promise-based reason remains undefeated; the missing emergency is not another breach.

An option-comparative theorist may nevertheless represent an absent benefit as a comparative consideration. That representation is legitimate. The absence of cosmic meaning can ground a preference for C+ over C0 because C+ contains a good that C0 lacks. What does not follow is that the

same consideration favours N over C0, or that it supplies a reason against creation independent of the burdens that make C0 objectionable. If those burdens place C0 below an adequacy or permissibility threshold, the unavailability of cosmic compensation can be decisive. Its decisiveness is explained by the burden and the threshold, not by a second bad introduced by the missing response. The distinction is thus explanatory and evidential, not a prohibition on negative descriptions of absent goods.

A separate necessity condition would change the analysis. A norm might require that every created person participate in a cosmic purpose, regardless of whether terrestrial goods make the life good for that person. The absence of cosmic meaning would then be a wrong-making feature under that norm. But the norm would need an independent defence: it would have to identify the duty, its beneficiary, and the reason cosmic rather than finite meaning satisfies it. Benatar's claims that cosmic meaning would improve or mitigate life do not establish those elements.

This framework also explains why practical relevance does not entail independent weight. The absence of an exception, permission or countervailing consideration can determine which reason controls without grounding another reason of its own. A cumulative case may contain both independent objections and failed replies to them, but those components have different sources. When suffering supplies the objection and cosmic nihilism shows only that one answer is unavailable, the case contains an undefeated reason rather than suffering plus an additional cosmic burden.

4 Independent Disvalue

Some of Benatar's earlier formulations, and the additive reconstructions of them, treat cosmic meaninglessness as bad independently of life's familiar burdens. The required claim is stronger than C + > C0. A life can be worse than another possible life without being harmful to its subject, below a threshold of adequate flourishing, or worse than non-creation. Comparative improvement does not fix the normative status of the baseline.

Benatar's language sometimes moves from improvement to deficit. Terrestrial meaning is genuine, but its failure to provide a point to the entire human enterprise leaves a serious lack (Benatar 2017, 60–63). His earlier account similarly moves from the value of cosmic meaning to the judgement that actual lives are much less good for lacking it (Benatar 2006, 82–83). The 2022 reply still calls the absence of substantial meaning very bad and tragic (Benatar 2022, 129–130). An antinatalist conclusion requires a further premise. The alleged deficit must place the life below a defensible procreative threshold, harm the person under an independently defended account of harm, or make the outcome containing the life worse than non-creation.

Cosmic meaning might be proposed as an objective constituent of adequate flourishing. Meaning can be a dimension of a good life distinct from pleasure and morality, and objective goods need not depend on an agent's desires. The difficulty is explaining why cosmic extent marks adequacy rather than excellence. Knowledge, longevity, autonomy, influence and achievement can improve a life by degree without being required at their maximal degree. Landau makes this point about cosmic impact: what would be superbly

meaningful need not mark the boundary between sufficient and insufficient meaning (Landau 2020, 435–437). A cosmic achievement may exceed a local one while the local achievement remains adequately valuable.

Meaninglessness can also contribute to a person's bad experience when it frustrates an aspiration she actually has. Someone who wants an ultimate purpose may respond to cosmic nihilism with grief, alienation or disappointment. Those responses could lower her welfare. Their negative value would arise from the person's commitments and response, however, rather than from meaninglessness independently of all attitudes. Other people may lack the aspiration, revise it, or find sufficient orientation in terrestrial projects. Tartaglia's neutral nihilism presses this separation: the descriptive claim that life has no cosmic goal acquires evaluative force only with further beliefs, expectations or promised rewards (Tartaglia 2025, 1–5, 10, 17–18). One need not accept his stronger claim that indifference is always fitting to deny a uniform deficit.

An impersonal argument also requires a marginal comparison. A universe ordered by a valuable cosmic purpose may be better than an otherwise similar purposeless universe. It does not follow that adding a terrestrially meaningful life to the purposeless universe makes that universe worse. C0 may contain love, knowledge, agency and achievement absent from N even though C+ would be better still. The loss of a possible cosmic good must therefore be connected to the choice between C0 and N rather than treated as though it were automatically a bad added by C0.

Weinberg gives ultimate pointlessness a more precise form. A point is a valued end that supplies an end-regarding reason for an enterprise; because a life contains all its ends, no end can stand outside living and provide an ultimate point. Sadness about that condition may be fitting (Weinberg 2021, 1–6). Yet her analysis separates ultimate pointlessness from worthlessness and preserves the value of love, truth, justice and intimacy within a life. Fitting sadness about an unattainable improvement is compatible with judging the actual life adequate. Lee's account likewise shows how finite agency can support an overall favourable evaluation despite evolutionary contingency and limited cosmic effect (Lee 2023, 194–195).

The independent-disvalue route therefore needs an account of the relevant threshold or wrong. Cosmic meaning would add value, and its absence may frustrate particular agents or warrant impersonal regret. Neither result establishes that every cosmically meaningless life contains a distinct bad or that cosmic nihilism supplies a reason against creation independent of life's other burdens. That conclusion requires a theory of what creators owe, what counts as adequate flourishing, or what makes adding a life impersonally worse.

5 Aggravation and Pointless Suffering

Benatar's language of mitigation and pointless suffering also invites an aggravation interpretation. Here the question is whether suffering is worse because cosmic meaning is absent, not merely accompanied by less total value, left uncompensated, or left unjustified. A psychological proposal may require a causal

mechanism. A constitutive or holistic proposal need not. It must nevertheless provide an account of the evaluative relation rather than assume that pointlessness intensifies suffering by definition.

One use of 'pointless suffering' concerns the absence of a valuable result. Pain endured during a successful rescue may be instrumentally useful, while physically identical pain produced by a futile procedure is not. A later reward, achievement or restoration may also make a life containing pain better than a comparable life without the good. In these cases the difference may be fully explained by value elsewhere in the outcome. Unless futility or non-compensation changes the experience or produces another harm, the pain has not become more severe. The package is less good, but the missing benefit is not an added burden within it.

A second use concerns justification. Suffering may belong to no permissible practice or defensible order. This is a claim about the act that imposes the burden, not necessarily about its magnitude for the person. A burden can be unjustifiably imposed even when compensation is generous, and it can remain prudentially bad when its imposition is justified. If a cosmic purpose would justify creating a person exposed to suffering, cosmic nihilism leaves the justificatory objection undefeated. It does not follow that the person's pain is greater or that her welfare contains a further cosmic loss.

A stronger opponent may claim that pointless suffering is constitutively worse as a normative whole even when its phenomenal character is unchanged. That position cannot be dismissed for lacking a causal mechanism. It must instead explain what bears the worsened property. The candidate might be the episode of suffering, the life containing it, or the act that imposed it. It must also explain why terrestrial purposes, acknowledgement or repair cannot supply the relevant relation. Without that account, 'constitutively worse' names the disputed conclusion rather than supporting it.

Perceived pointlessness could produce a separate psychological harm. A person who cannot endorse or integrate an episode of suffering might become resentful, alienated or hopeless, or might find her agency and self-understanding impaired. These are possibilities, not consequences entailed by cosmic nihilism. Seachris supports the more limited claim that the meaning-of-life question can be understood as a request for a narrative connecting matters of existential concern within a wider context (Seachris 2009, 5–8). Whether failure to secure such a narrative produces the listed harms, and whether a cosmic narrative would prevent them better than a terrestrial one, would require further argument or empirical support.

Terrestrial sources of intelligibility complicate the aggravation claim. A person may endorse hardship for a child, political cause, knowledge, art or another finite end. Personal and historical narratives may integrate suffering without a cosmic goal, and human agents may acknowledge or partly repair wrongs. Conversely, a purported cosmic purpose may deepen alienation if it treats persons as instruments, while an intelligible narrative may explain sacrifice without justifying it. The absence of cosmic meaning therefore does not establish non-endorsement, fragmentation or failed rectification.

Rectification illustrates the need to identify the relevant bearer and relation. The impossibility of restoring a murder victim may increase the gravity of the wrong, leave claims of relatives unmet, or make the loss irreversible. Those consequences are tied to the original injury and to agents who owe acknowledgement or repair. A doctrine of final justice might answer them, but its falsity does not automatically create a harm over and above the death and injustice. The argument must specify who is worse off, which claim remains unsatisfied, and why finite forms of acknowledgement cannot perform the relevant role.

Benatar's medical analogy does not settle these questions. An unavailable treatment bears a clear relation to illness: the illness impairs health and the treatment would alleviate that impairment. Cosmic meaning might instead add achievement, hope, explanation, compensation or justification. The analogy leaves open which relation is intended and whether the burden itself changes (Benatar 2022, 131). The same problem arises with brevity and death. A brief life might have been better if it contributed to an eternal good, and death might be less tragic if followed by restoration. These comparisons introduce a benefit or avert a further loss; they do not by themselves alter the deprivation involved in death or the burdens preceding it. Lougheed is right that the modal remoteness of immortality does not make regret about death irrational (Lougheed 2025, 255–261), but fitting regret does not identify a further bad caused by cosmic nihilism.

Pointless suffering may therefore name three different claims: the absence of benefit, the absence of justification, or a genuine aggravating relation. The first two can affect the final judgement without worsening the suffering. The third could increase the severity of the suffering, add a separate harm, or increase the gravity of the act that imposed it. Benatar's discussion does not provide the account needed to establish any of those stronger relations.

6 Compensation, Justification and Substitution

Benatar's 2022 clarification is most plausible when cosmic meaning is treated as a possible answer to burdens rather than as another burden. The goods within a life may offset its burdens even when creating that life was wrongful, and an act of creation may be justified while leaving some costs uncompensated. Keeping those questions apart reveals what the cosmic premise can and cannot establish.

Compensation may be person-affecting or impersonal. A good may benefit the created person, improve the value of the world, or do both. Benatar's concern with whether procreation is justified in the face of poor quality gives person-affecting compensation special importance: value elsewhere cannot automatically offset severe costs borne by this person. Even an impersonal theory must connect the loss of a cosmic good to the marginal choice between C0 and N rather than enter it again as a burden within C0.

A justificatory argument may begin from the foreseeable burdens imposed by procreation on a person who cannot consent in advance. Whether that fact creates a presumptive objection is controversial and need not be settled here. The conditional point is enough: if some burden supplies a reason against

creation and cosmic meaning would answer it, meaninglessness removes that answer. Benatar's claim that no ultimate, or even great, meaning can justify procreation in the face of poor quality has this structure (Benatar 2022, 128). It does not determine the strength of the initial objection or show that every terrestrial justification fails.

Justification must also be distinguished from a creator's motive or explanatory purpose. Parents may act from love, social expectation or self-interest while permissibility depends on features of the life and the risks imposed. A cosmic purpose might explain why humanity exists without justifying any particular person's exposure to suffering. The relevant good must bear an appropriate relation to the person burdened, not merely to a creator's plan or to the universe considered as a whole.

Cosmic scale does not establish that relation. An achievement benefiting distant beings may create immense impersonal value without benefiting each person exposed to the costs of producing it. A divine purpose may connect each person to a good, but its content must be beneficial and respectful rather than instrumental; Benatar himself notes that an assigned purpose may demean persons (Benatar 2017, 37–40). Wakeman and Launonen's Christian universalism gives the proposal substantive content by placing every person within an eternal beneficent order (Wakeman and Launonen 2025). The justificatory work, if any, is done by the good and each person's relation to it, not by cosmic extent alone.

Terrestrial goods remain possible substitutes unless a non-substitutability thesis is defended. Love, agency, knowledge, achievement and care may compensate for burdens or justify exposure to ordinary risks. Benatar's quality-of-life argument denies that these goods are sufficient in actual lives, but that denial performs the substantive work. If 'great meaning' includes terrestrial meaning, cosmic nihilism is not the relevant premise. If only cosmic meaning could meet the threshold, the argument must explain why finite goods cannot do so.

A separate norm requiring cosmic meaning would again change the structure. It might prohibit creation even where finite goods compensate for every welfare burden. Such a norm would have to identify a duty and explain why participation in a cosmic purpose is owed to a prospective person. Nothing in the claims about compensation or justification supplies that argument. Cosmic nihilism can remove a response to a burden, and that removal may be decisive, without grounding a further burden or an independent reason against creation.

7 Objections

1. Benatar has already conceded the central claim. His 2022 reply does reject the isolation of cosmic meaninglessness as a disvalue distinct from life's familiar harms. The article accepts that clarification. Its contribution is to identify what follows from it and what does not. If meaning would compensate for burdens or justify their imposition, its absence leaves a response unavailable. Benatar's continued language of badness, mitigation and pointlessness can still suggest independent disvalue or aggravation, but those stronger claims require arguments not supplied by the clarification itself.

2. A cumulative case may include failed defences as well as independent reasons. It may. Cosmic nihilism should not be omitted when a proposed defence appeals to a beneficent cosmic order. Showing that no such order exists can defeat the proposal and leave antinatalism as the all-things-considered conclusion if the burdens are otherwise decisive. The distinction concerns the source of the conclusion. A failed defence is tied to the objection it was meant to answer; it cannot be detached and counted as an independent reason where that underlying objection has not been established.
3. Cosmic meaning is non-substitutable. An opponent may argue that cosmic meaning gives a point to terrestrial goods and to the enterprise containing them, so finite goods cannot compensate or justify when the whole is ultimately pointless. This dependency thesis is substantive, not an implication of greater scale. Tartaglia denies that cosmic nihilism undermines ordinary value or reasons, while Landau permits moderate standards of meaning within the widest perspective (Tartaglia 2025, 4–5; Landau 2020, 435–437). Weinberg's account gives the concern a stronger form: everyday projects have points because they are directed towards valued ends, yet a life as a whole cannot have an external end (Weinberg 2021, 1–6). Her analysis still permits pointless lives to contain value, significance and justified action.
The dependency thesis also faces a stopping problem. A final cosmic point must itself be valuable; its position at the end of an explanatory chain cannot confer value on a vicious or trivial purpose. Once that final end and each person's relation to it are specified, the normative work is done by the value and relation, not by cosmic scale alone. Non-substitutability could support an independent threshold or necessity condition, but it needs an argument beyond the claim that cosmic meaning would improve a life.

4. Adding a negative consideration and removing a defeater are only alternative descriptions. At the level of pairwise comparison, an absent good can indeed be described negatively: C0 lacks what makes C+ better. The descriptions diverge when one asks what follows for N and what evidence is required. If meaninglessness is independently bad, it can count against creating an otherwise excellent life. If it only removes compensation, its relevance depends on the seriousness of the burdens and the threshold they must meet. If it removes one theological justification, another justification may remain. These are not verbal differences because they change the conditions under which the argument survives.

8 Conclusion

Benatar's 2022 clarification places cosmic meaning in a responsive role within his poor-quality argument: it might compensate for life's burdens or justify imposing them, but no such meaning is available. That absence can be verdict-changing because it leaves the burden-based case unanswered, yet Benatar has not shown that it introduces a distinct bad within the created life or a pro tanto reason against creation independent of those burdens. An aggravation claim would require an account of how meaninglessness worsens the suffering, the life, or the act that imposes it, while a necessity claim would require a separate deontic norm. Cosmic nihilism may therefore close a defence of procreation without itself adding a further burden.

Declarations

Ethics statement

Not applicable. This article is a work of philosophical analysis and does not report research involving human participants, human data or tissue, animals, or any procedures requiring approval by a research ethics committee.

Author Contribution

The author conceived the research question, developed the argument, conducted the literature review, drafted and revised the manuscript, and approved the final version for submission.

Data availability

No datasets were generated or analysed for this article.

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