

Notes & Comments: January 2008

The “wisdom” of Silenus

Near the beginning of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche tells the ancient story of King Midas hunting in the forest for the wise Silenus, the companion of Dionysus. At last, after many years, the King manages to capture him and asks what is the best and most desirable thing for man. Silenus maintains a surly silence until, goaded by the King, he bursts out with a contemptuous laugh and says, “Oh, wretched ephemeral race . . . why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to *be*, to be *nothing*. But the second best for you is—to die soon.” Cheery, eh? Nietzsche’s idea was that the Greeks knew and felt this horror of (or perhaps horror *at*) existence and that they constructed their beautiful art and their Olympian gods as a kind of dreamlike camouflage to conceal the truth.

Maybe so. But apart from professional pessimists like Nietzsche’s mentor Arthur Schopenhauer, most people are rightly repelled by this so-called wisdom of Silenus. They understand that life is an inestimable gift, the denial of which is part folly, part obscenity. We said “most people.” There are exceptions. Suicide bombers, disturbed

teenagers, and of course certain grand-standing academics. Take Professor David Benatar, head of the department of philosophy at the University of Cape Town. In 2006, Oxford University Press—that’s the venerable press whose motto is “Dominus illuminatio mea” (“The Lord is my light”)—published Professor Benatar’s *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Some enlightenment! “The central idea of this book,” we read on the first page of its introduction, “is that coming into existence is always a serious harm.” The publisher’s blurb tell us more:

Those who never exist cannot be deprived. However, by coming into existence one does suffer quite serious harms that could not have befallen one had one not come into existence. Drawing on the relevant psychological literature, the author shows that there are a number of well-documented features of human psychology that explain why people systematically overestimate the quality of their lives and why they are thus resistant to the suggestion that they were seriously harmed by being brought into existence. The author then argues for the “anti-natal” view—that it is always wrong to have children—and he shows that combining the anti-natal view with common pro-choice views about foetal moral status yields a “pro-death” view about abortion (at the earlier stages of gestation). Anti-natalism also implies that it would be better if humanity became extinct.

One of the comments on this book at Amazon.com complains that people have been rejecting the book without reading it or arguing against Professor Benatar's position. Doubtless there is plenty to argue with, not to say ridicule, in *Better Never to Have Been*. One might start by meditating on what words like "harm" and "better" might mean in the world according to Benatar. It is sobering to contemplate what logical and existential armageddon had to have occurred in order for something like this book to have been written. Still, we believe people are right to take that high road and reject the book without engaging its argument. To quote Nietzsche again, you do not refute a disease: you might cure it, quarantine it, or in some cases ignore it altogether. You don't argue with it. Reason is profitably employed only among the reasonable. Dr. Johnson had the right idea when he employed the pedal expedient against Bishop Berkeley's doctrine of universal hallucination. Something similar should be employed in the case of Professor Benatar's Lemmings First doctrine of human fatuousness.

Indeed, we bother to mention Professor Benatar's offering at all not because of its intellectual or moral merits but because it seems to us a telling sign of the times. Professor Benatar is part of a larger "environmental" movement of like-minded nihilists like Toni Vernelli, an Englishwoman who at twenty-seven had herself sterilized in order to reduce her "carbon footprint" and help "protect the planet." "Every person who is born," Ms. Vernelli told a reporter, "uses more food, more water, more land, more fossil fuels, more trees and produces more rubbish, more pollution, more greenhouse gases, and adds to the problem of over-population." Ms. Vernelli is 35 now, works for an "environmental charity," and is happily married to Ed, her second husband: "A week before my sterilisation, I went to an animal rights demonstration and met Ed." Life is good for Ed and Toni. "We feel we can

have one long-haul flight a year," she explained, "as we are vegan and childless, thereby greatly reducing our carbon footprint and combating over-population." Still, there are frustrations. "A woman like me, who is not having children in order to save the planet, is considered barking mad," Ms. Vernelli lamented. "What I consider mad are those women who ferry their children short distances in gas-guzzling cars."

We doubt that even Jonathan Swift could have improved on Ms. Vernelli. And as *The Daily Mail* noted in a story on such "antinatalists," she is far from alone. She is part of a small but growing movement in the West. When James Burnham published *The Suicide of the West* in 1964, what he chiefly feared was the West's lack of resolve to stand up to encroaching Communism. Quite right, too. Burnham was well endowed with what Henry James called the "imagination of disaster." But we think that even Burnham might have been nonplussed by a Western intellectual who went beyond political capitulation to total existential surrender and whose proclamation of that gospel found a home at one of our greatest university presses. Even as we were absorbing Professor Benatar's repackaging of Silenus, we stumbled upon an article revealing that sun-drenched, life-loving Italy had become "the least happy" country in Europe. "It's a country," said Walter Veltroni, the mayor of Rome, "that has lost a little of its will for the future." It's also a country that has eagerly adopted the philosophy of Professor Benatar and Ms. Vernelli: Italy's birth rate is an astonishing 1.23, among the lowest in Europe. This is "antinatalism" with a vengeance.

England, an epitaph

Books like *Better Never to Have Been* and folks like Toni Vernelli, Ed, and their fellow vegan, eco-conscious, non-fossil-fuel-burn-