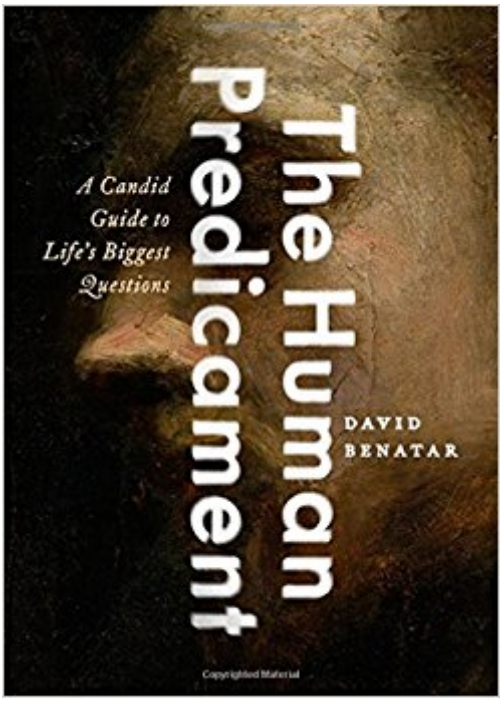
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The Human Predicament: A Candid Guide To Life's Biggest Questions



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Synopsis

Are our lives meaningful, or meaningless? Is our inevitable death a bad thing? Would immortality be an improvement? Would it be better, all things considered, to hasten our deaths by suicide? Many people ask these big questions -- and some people are plagued by them. Surprisingly, analytic philosophers have said relatively little about these important questions about the meaning of life. When they have tackled the big questions, they have tended, like popular writers, to offer comforting, optimistic answers. The Human Predicament invites readers to take a clear-eyed and unfettered view of the human condition. David Benatar here offers a substantial, but not unmitigated, pessimism about the central questions of human existence. He argues that while our lives can have some meaning, we are ultimately the insignificant beings that we fear we might be. He maintains that the quality of life, although less bad for some than for others, leaves much to be desired in even the best cases. Worse, death is generally not a solution; in fact, it exacerbates rather than mitigates our cosmic meaninglessness. While it can release us from suffering, it imposes another cost - annihilation. This state of affairs has nuanced implications for how we should think about many things, including immortality and suicide, and how we should think about the possibility of deeper meaning in our lives. Ultimately, this thoughtful, provocative, and deeply candid treatment of life's big questions will interest anyone who has contemplated why we are here, and what the answer means for how we should live.

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Customer Reviews

"What thinking person doesn’t care about the (possible) meaning and quality of life, the nature and disvalue of death, and the option of suicide? David Benatar addresses these and other engaging and important topics in this well-argued book. The quality of the writing is about as high as any philosophy I can remember reading: short, clear sentences, with not a word wasted or misplaced. I do not see the human predicament as pessimistically as David Benatar does; but I found myself disagreeing less than I expected to -- for example, in his sensitive and probing discussion of suicide." --David DeGrazia, George Washington University "David Benatar’s new book, The Human Predicament, offers justifiably pessimistic analyses of some of the most interesting and important issues of human existence, including birth, suffering, death, and suicide. Benatar’s analyses are as beautifully crafted and written as they are scholarly and thoughtful. The Human Predicament is a grand work of philosophy, but contains important insights for many of the social and life sciences, including psychology, sociology, biology, as well as to medicine and law. Not only will I recommend this book to my colleagues and graduate and undergraduate students, but I also will recommend it to my family and friends. The Human Predicament is a stunning achievement by a deeply compassionate man." -- Todd Shackelford, Distinguished Professor and Chair of Psychology, Oakland University

David Benatar is Professor of Philosophy at University of Cape Town, South Africa. He is the author of Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence (2006) and Debating Procreation: Is it Wrong to Reproduce? (2015).

A profound work on the human predicament each of us faces between cosmic meaninglessness and death, both of which are painful conditions resulting in either despair or annihilation, only slightly relieved by limited terrestrial meaning and a qualified justification of suicide.

The best, yet most painful, book I’ve read. The further I read, the more I wished Professor Benatar was delusional or unjustifiably pessimistic. Alas, my wish was not granted.

I hope David Benatar continues to write books. Having read The Human Predicament (THP), itÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s hard to imagine what a follow-up project would look like. THP is one of those works that reads as a definitive statement of a thinkerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s main ideas. And the topics Benatar discusses ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ which essentially revolve around the (un-)reality, extent, and practical significance of lifeÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s meaningfulness, worthwhileness, and burdensome

character ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ come close to exhausting the most fundamental concerns of any sensitive and philosophically inclined person. (How close? That depends, say, on how far one agrees with CamusÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s opening to The Myth of Sisyphus. It is perhaps more urgent to get straight on the question of suicide, than to adjudicate between AristotleÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s and KantÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s accounts of the categories.)Many readers of THP should already be familiar with Benatar as an advocate of antinatalism, a view which maintains that, for any being capable of suffering harm, it is a misfortune to have come into existence, and moreover, as a consequence, we should never choose to procreate.Benatar discusses antinatalism and its implications in an earlier book called Better Never to Have Been (BNTHB), and some of the discussion is reiterated in THP. To my mind, antinatalism receives more interesting treatment in THP, because THP emphasizes the more interesting aspect of antinatalism: the view that life is an affliction (to plagiarize Edgar Saltus) ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ or simply, pessimism. BNTHB, in contrast, spends more time on the anti-procreative aspect of antinatalism, to the point of asking whether abortion should be regarded as morally obligatory (and not merely permissible), and whether the ideal population size is zero; these, even when handled professionally, can be little more than philosophically interesting issues which nevertheless reinforce peopleÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s image of philosophy itself as juvenile and pointless.But upon finishing THP, I felt that pessimism had gained a respectable voice, as a consequence of both the bookÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s substance and its style.BenatarÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s writing is mostly clear, sober, and dispassionate, helpfully organized, professional but conversational, devoid of stuffiness and excessive jargon. It isnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t relentlessly depressing; most of what he writes (as with much philosophical literature) is intended to develop, clarify, and support his arguments ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ but it isnÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t too much of a chore to read. And not all of it reads like an academic article: There is some unobtrusive humor (see, e.g., the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“atheist T-shirtÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•). ThereÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s a glimpse of natureÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s jaw-dropping cruelty, for which Benatar borrows another authorÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s description of some predatory animals in the act of killing. And finally, the discussion of suicide at times seems consciously ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“restrained,ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• by which I mean that I could picture Benatar struggling not to be overtaken by righteous anger against his more callous and thoughtless opponents (who would have it that suicide, with few if any exceptions, is ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“obviouslyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• wrong, irrational, cowardly, etc.). Otherwise Benatar maintains an even tone, and the book ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ and the credibility of pessimism itself ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ benefit from it; it should accordingly be difficult for his opponent to ridicule or pathologize his position, or write it off as a

mere eccentricity.As for the substance, BenatarÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s key conclusions may be identified as follows: (1) Human life can, fortunately, be meaningful, but only in limited, qualified ways: Our lives can mean something (i.e., can make a valuable difference) to other humans, but rarely to society at large, and never to the universe. (2) Our cosmic meaninglessness is regrettable. (3) Most people greatly overestimate the quality of their lives. (4) Life is actually quite bad overall. (5) Death, too, is quite bad, and not merely because it deprives us of agreeable future experiences; it is intrinsically bad for us to be annihilated. (6) Although immortality could be very bad, it could under certain conditions be very good; and this makes our mortality regrettable. (7) Suicide, while tragic, is not always immoral or irrational; it is conceivable for a sane individual to judge her suicide as the most warranted response to her (or our) condition, and morality and compassion oblige us to respect the rights of such persons to make such decisions. (8) We are morally obligated not to procreate. (9) Our limited sources of meaning (e.g. among family, friends, and the community) may be welcomed as ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“distractionsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• from the harsh realities of the human situation.I wonÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢t elaborate on these here; nor will I mention which of these conclusions are, to my mind, supported more or less persuasively, or which should be rejected in favor of something else. I see those as tasks to be undertaken throughout oneÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s life. IÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢m grateful to Benatar for the clarity and stimulation, and for demonstrating about as well as one can nowadays that pessimism can be a respectable philosophical outlook.Now, some readers will regard BenatarÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s treatment of these perennial concerns as a tad breezy and superficial. To them (and to anyone interested in philosophical pessimism) I would suggest looking into Frederick BeiserÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s Weltschmerz for a taste of the great pessimism controversy of 19th-century German philosophy. The participants in that controversy supply some insights and alternative perspectives that don't receive treatment in THP ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ and Beiser recreates them in summary form. (I only wish there were more English translations of the philosophers Beiser discusses.) Also, I am much less acquainted with Eastern philosophy, but I fully expect an eventual research into, say, Buddhism to enhance my understanding of pessimism.

David Benatar's new book, The Human Predicament, offers justifiably pessimistic analyses of some of the most interesting and important issues of human existence, including birth, suffering, death, and suicide. Benatar's analyses are as beautifully crafted and written as they are scholarly and thoughtful. The Human Predicament is a grand work of philosophy, but contains important insights for many of the social and life sciences, including psychology, sociology, biology, as well as

medicine and law. Not only will I recommend this book to my colleagues and graduate and undergraduate students, but I also will recommend it to my family and friends. The Human Predicament is a stunning achievement by a deeply compassionate man.

Similar to his previous work, Prof. Benatar presents an eloquent and logical explanation of the human condition. Unfortunately, his intellectual approach only goes so far. Humans, being part animal, rely on instincts and emotion when confronting the physical fact that their parents condemned them to pain and death to serve their own needs. Those who mindlessly procreate certainly find it impossible to admit the physical fact that their offspring will suffer and die.As the author points out, the greatest tragedy of humanity is the establishment of religion that promises an afterlife. Consequently, parents who create life in their own image and likeness will subscribe to the myth that their children will go on after death. As a result, religion perpetuates suffering when it is supposed to reduce it.Those who argue that the hopelessness engendered by this book will lead to suicide fail to note that an unfounded belief in life after physical death encourages taking of one's own life. Facing the fact that life ends at death should strengthen every effort to prolong physical existence.By following the unassailable logic of "The Human Predicament", human beings can resist social, cultural and physical pressure and admit that life is created by humans to meet the needs of the existing humans who are using their progeny to give their lives meaning where none exists.This book is a courageous description of a behavior that thinking humans know at some level is destroying the planet and life on it. These observations can be the catalyst for a change of consciousness that eliminates procreation and saves future generations from having to endure and witness needless suffering.

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