

# Conditional Reasons and the Procreation Asymmetry

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*Abstract:* This paper sketches a theory of the reason-giving force of well-being that allows us to reconcile our intuitions about two of the most recalcitrant problem cases in population ethics: Jan Narveson's *Procreation Asymmetry* and Derek Parfit's *Non-Identity Problem*. I show that what has prevented philosophers from developing a theory that gives a satisfactory account of *both* these problems is their tacit commitment to a teleological conception of well-being, as something to be 'promoted'. Replacing this picture with one according to which our reasons to confer well-being on people are *conditional* on their existence allows me to do better. It also enables us to understand some of the deep structural parallels between seemingly disparate normative phenomena such as procreating and promising. The resulting theory charts a middle way between the familiar dichotomy of narrow person-affecting theories and totalist or wide-person affecting theories in population ethics.

## 1. The Procreation Asymmetry

Many of us hold pre-theoretical views about the morality of procreation that are, in an important sense, asymmetrical. Suppose you can foresee that a child you could create would live a life so full of uncompensated suffering as to be not worth living.<sup>1</sup> Most would agree that – exceptional circumstances aside – it would constitute a serious moral wrong to bring this child into existence. That is, given a choice between

*Nobody:* Create no new life

and

*Misery:* Create person A, with a life that is not worth living

we believe that there is strong moral reason to choose Nobody over Misery.

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<sup>1</sup> More precisely, imagine that such a child would have a life that is, in Derek Parfit's phrase, "*worth not living*", since its life would be *worse* than a life spent in a permanent coma (which would also be *not worth living*). For stylistic reasons, I will continue to use the former locution. However, you may assume throughout that when I refer to a life as "not worth living" this is also a life that is "*worth not living*", in Parfit's sense.

Next, imagine that you could create a child with a life that would be well worth living; perhaps you could even create a child with a very happy life. Many have the intuition that it is morally *indifferent* whether you decide to create such a child or not. All else equal, it seems permissible for you to have the child if you wish; but we don't believe that you act contrary to strong moral reasons, let alone a moral obligation, if you decide not to. That is, given a choice between

*Nobody*: Create no new life

*Good*: Create person B, with a moderately happy life

or a choice between

*Nobody*: Create no new life

*Great*: Create person C, with a very happy life

or indeed a choice between all *three* options, many believe there is no moral reason to choose Great, or Good, over Nobody. Taken together, these intuitions make up what philosophers in the field of population ethics call the Procreation Asymmetry (or Asymmetry for short):<sup>2</sup>

*Procreation Asymmetry*:

(1) If a future person would foreseeably have a life that is not worth living, this in itself gives us a strong moral reason to refrain from bringing this person into existence.

By contrast, (2) there is no moral reason to create a person whose life would foreseeably be worth living, just *because* her life would be worth living.<sup>3</sup>

My aim in this paper is to provide a defense of the Procreation Asymmetry.

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<sup>2</sup> The Asymmetry was first discussed by Jan Narveson in "Utilitarianism and New Generations", *Mind* 76 (1967), pp. 62-72. The label is due to Jeff McMahan, "Problems of Population Theory", *Ethics*, 92 (1981), pp. 96-127.

<sup>3</sup> In this essay I do not take a stand on what, exactly, makes a life worth living or not worth living for a person. That is, I shall remain agnostic with regard to the correct theory of well-being (which I understand as that which makes a person's life worth living for that person). The Asymmetry, I argue, is true whichever theory of well-being we have most reason to endorse. In keeping with established practice in the literature on the Asymmetry, I sometimes employ the phrases "a happy life" and "a miserable life" as synonyms for "a life worth living" and "a life not worth living". "Happy" and "miserable" should here be understood in a sense that is agnostic with regard to the true theory of well-being.

## 2. Three Adequacy Conditions

With few exceptions, those who reject the Procreation Asymmetry accept the first conjunct but deny the second. Instead, they affirm that we *do* have significant moral reasons to create new people whose lives would be worth living *because* they would be worth living. I shall refer to these opponents of the Procreation Asymmetry as holding a *symmetry* view.

Proponents of symmetry views can be grouped into two overlapping camps: First, there are *totalist* act utilitarians, who believe that we always have decisive moral reason to do what makes the world go best, namely to produce the greatest possible net aggregate of well-being over ill-being. Totalists reject the Asymmetry, since creating a new happy person, just like making an existing person happy, is a way of adding well-being to the world. Second, the Asymmetry is rejected by all those philosophers who think that we have moral reason to *benefit* people by bringing them into existence.

The aim of this paper is not to present a knock-down argument against such symmetry views. Given the very fundamental nature of this disagreement, such an argument would be hard to come by. More importantly, there is a sense in which such an argument is not *needed*. The Asymmetry strikes many people – even some of those who have opposed it in print – as intuitively highly plausible. For instance, John Broome, after almost fifteen years of arguing against the intuition, confesses to still being gripped by it:

We [intuitively] care about the well-being of people who exist; we want their well-being to be increased. If it is increased, an effect will be that there will be more well-being in the world. But we do not want to increase the amount of well-being in the world for its own sake. A different way of achieving that result would be to have more people in the world, but most of us are not in favor of that. We are not against it either; we are neutral about the number of people.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> John Broome, *Climate Matters: Ethics for a Warming World* (New York: Norton, 2012), p. 171.

Furthermore, common-sense ethical thought rejects many of the strongly revisionary implications that symmetry views would appear to have. Again I quote from Broome:

When people's lives are saved, by making roads safer or in other ways, the well-being of the people who are saved is generally small in comparison to the well-being of all the new people, their descendants, who come into existence as a result. This is perfectly predictable. If all the descendants' well-being had to be counted too, that would enormously alter the value we attach to saving people's lives. But actually, in judging the value of safety on the roads, we routinely ignore all this well-being.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, upholding the Asymmetry intuition also has important theoretical payoffs within the field of population ethics, since rejecting (2) invites a version of Parfit's *Repugnant Conclusion*. If we have pro tanto moral reason to create any life that is worth living, this opens up the possibility that creating a world in which a very large number of people have lives that are *barely* worth living is morally preferable to one in which every member of a smaller population enjoys an excellent life.

What has stood in the way of more widespread acceptance of the Procreation Asymmetry amongst population ethicists is that, to date, all attempts at fleshing out and defending this intuition have encountered serious difficulties. In particular, I claim, there are three minimal adequacy conditions which no existing account of the Procreation Asymmetry has so far managed to satisfy.

First, it has proven surprisingly difficult to give an account of the Procreation Asymmetry that does not preclude us from giving the intuitively correct verdict about another famous problem case in population ethics, Derek Parfit's Non-Identity Problem<sup>6</sup>. Consider:

*Non-Identity Case:*

You are contemplating whether to have a child. You face a costless choice between three options:

*Nobody:* Create no new life

*Good:* Create person B, with a moderately happy life

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<sup>5</sup> "Should We Value Population?", *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (2005): 399-413, p. 402.

<sup>6</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), Ch. 16.

*Great*: Create person C, with a very happy life.

Assume that the reason why person B would have a life that is foreseeably less happy than that of person C is that B would be born with a life that, while still well worth living, is affected by a serious congenital ailment.

The judgment that almost everyone has about this case is this:

*Non-Identity Intuition*: You have a strong moral reason not to choose Good over Great.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, your reason not to choose Good over Great in this case seems comparable in strength to your reason not to choose Good over Better in the following Same-Person Case<sup>8</sup>:

*Same-Person Case*:

You face a choice between three options:

*Nobody*: Create no new life

*Good*: Create person B, with a moderately happy life

*Better*: Create *person B*, with a very happy life.

The problem, as I show in the next section, is that most existing attempts to defend the Procreation Asymmetry *commit* us to rejecting the Non-Identity Intuition. This seems an unacceptable price to pay. Thus, the first adequacy condition on a defense of the Procreation Asymmetry is that it allows us to uphold the Non-Identity Intuition.

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<sup>7</sup> For my own, more detailed take on this 'genetic' version of Parfit's Non-Identity Problem, see my "Zukünftige Personen und Schuld ohne Opfer" ("Future Persons and Victimless Wrongdoing") in Markus Rüter and Sebastian Muders (eds.) *Worauf es ankommt: Derek Parfits praktische Philosophie in der Diskussion* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> Parfit endorses a stronger claim, the *No Difference View*, according to which there is *no morally relevant difference* between a same-person choice, in which choosing Good is *worse* for person B than another available option, and a different-person choice, like *Non-Identity Case*, in which choosing Good is not worse for anybody, provided the two actions have equivalent overall effects. (*Reasons and Persons*, pp. 366-369). We need not, however, accept the No Difference View. Thus, it might be argued that one difference between the two cases is that while in Same Person Case, choosing Good *wrongs* a person, choosing Good in Non-Identity Case wrongs no-one, and that this difference affects the comparative strength of our reasons against choosing option Good in either case. For a development of this point, see my "Zukünftige Personen und Schuld ohne Opfer".

In addition, I believe that a successful account of the Procreation Asymmetry must offer a non-question begging response to two basic challenges.

Consider first what I term the *Objection from Benefit*: We all recognize that we have pro tanto moral reasons to benefit *existing* people by doing what is good for them – for instance saving their lives, which allows them to live longer. Given this, shouldn't we recognize a corresponding moral reason to benefit future people, by bringing them into existence with a life worth living?

Note that proponents of this Objection from Benefit need not be committed to the claim that it is *better* (or worse) *for* a person to be brought into existence. This claim has struck many philosophers as incoherent, since, they contend, it implies that it would have been *worse for* that person never to have existed. But this, it is argued, cannot be the case. If the individual in question never exists, there *is* no person *for whom* non-existence is worse, and consequently no-one for whom existence would have been better. The comparandum lacks a subject.<sup>9</sup> (Recall the old Yiddish joke: "Life is so terrible, it would be better never to have been born." Response: "Who is so lucky? Not one in ten thousand!" The joke works, because people who never exist can be neither the subjects of fortune or misfortune).

There is, however, a way of putting the Objection from Benefit that does not encounter such conceptual difficulties. As Jeff McMahan points out, it is both coherent and plausible that being caused to exist with a life worth living can be good for a person in a *non-comparative* sense, namely insofar as "the intrinsically good elements of the person's life more than compensate for the intrinsically bad elements."<sup>10</sup> This can be true despite the fact that the outcome in which she does not exist would not have been bad, or worse, for her. *Mutatis mutandis*, it can be non-comparatively bad for a person to be brought into existence with a life that is overall not worth living, despite the fact that never existing would not have been good, or better, for her. Because bringing a person into existence can be good or bad for her in this non-comparative sense, it is also plausible to speak of acts of procreation as "benefiting" and "harming" those whom they create. (McMahan calls these "existential" benefits and harms, in

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<sup>9</sup> For versions of this argument, see Krister Bykvist, "The Benefits of Coming into Existence", *Philosophical Studies* (2007), pp. 95-115 and Jeff McMahan, "Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives", *The Journal of Ethics* (2013), pp. 5-35. For a dissenting view, see Nils Holtug, "On the Value of Coming into Existence", *Journal of Ethics* (2001), pp. 361-384.

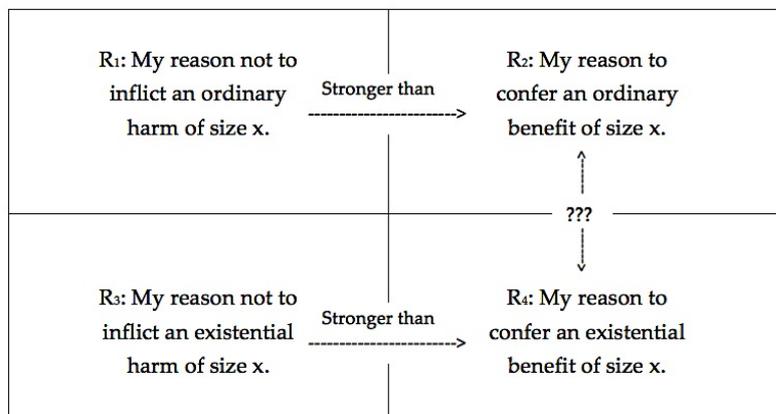
<sup>10</sup> "Causing People to Exist and Saving People's Lives", p. 6.

contrast with “ordinary” benefits and harms, “which are bestowed or inflicted on existing people, or on future individuals whose existence is independent of the act that causes or constitutes the benefit or harm.”<sup>11</sup>).

The question raised by the Objection from Benefit, then, is this: If what is good for existing people (ordinary benefits) makes a moral claim on us, why not also what is good for possible future persons (existential benefits)?

Fully grasping the Objection from Benefit will immediately block one mistaken way of thinking about the Procreation Asymmetry, namely to view it as just an instance of a more general moral asymmetry between the strength of our reasons not to harm and the strength of our reasons to benefit other people. Those who accept the Asymmetry believe, to paraphrase Jan Narveson’s famous dictum, that while there are often weighty moral reasons to make (existing) people happy, there is no corresponding moral reason to make happy people. By contrast, note that there is *no* such intuitive asymmetry when speaking of *miserable* lives: Our moral reasons against creating new lives that are miserable seem just as weighty as our reasons against making existing lives miserable.

Thus, as *Figure 1* illustrates, even if there is a general moral asymmetry between the strength of my reason not to harm and the strength of my reason to benefit other people, this couldn’t explain why, while I often have weighty moral reasons to provide *ordinary* benefits to people, I have no moral reason to provide *existential* benefits to people by creating them.



*Figure 1: The putative general asymmetry between harming and benefiting can explain why, all else equal, R<sub>1</sub> is stronger than R<sub>2</sub> and R<sub>3</sub> is stronger than R<sub>4</sub>. But it cannot explain why R<sub>2</sub> is stronger than R<sub>4</sub>.*

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

Second, there is what I call the *Objection from Symmetry*: We accept that if causing a person to exist would foreseeably be *bad for* that person, because her life would be not worth living, this gives us moral reason *against* bringing her into being. By symmetry of reasoning, why does the fact that causing a person to exist would foreseeably be *good for* that person, because her life would be worth living, not give us moral reason *for* bringing her into being?

I have explained my objective in this paper and stated three minimal adequacy conditions on successfully accomplishing it. Let me now briefly lay out how I shall proceed from here.

The argument of my paper will unfold in three parts. In Section 3, I survey a number of previous attempts to account for the Procreation Asymmetry, and show that they are all unsatisfactory, since they would *commit* us to rejecting the Non-Identity Intuition. I then argue that the common element that has bedeviled these previous attempts is a tacit commitment to a teleological conception of well-being, as something to be ‘promoted’.

In Sections 4 and 5, I set about clearing away this problematic assumption and replacing it with a more plausible account of the reason-giving force of well-being. According to the view I advocate, our moral reasons to confer well-being on people are what I call “bearer-dependent” reasons, and as such are *conditional* on the fact that the person being benefited exists. This allows me to offer an account of the Procreation Asymmetry that strikes me as both theoretically neat and inherently plausible, and allows me to meet the Objections from Benefit and Symmetry.

Finally, in Sections 6-9, I develop a unified account of the morality of procreation, which accommodates all the intuitive data under consideration, namely both conjuncts of the Procreation Asymmetry, as well as our moral judgments about Same-Person Case and Non-Identity Case.

### **3. The Procreation Asymmetry Versus the Non-Identity Intuition**

Proponents of the Procreation Asymmetry, we have seen, embrace two claims:

- (i) You have a strong moral reason to choose Nobody over Misery.
- (ii) You have no moral reason to choose Great, or Good, over Nobody.

As I shall now show, one of the key stumbling blocks for a plausible defense of the Asymmetry is to explain how (i) and (ii) can both be true, without being committed to denying the Non-Identity Intuition, according to which

(iii) You have a strong moral reason not to choose Good over Great.

Now, one moral view which has no problems explaining the truth of (iii) is, of course, totalist utilitarianism. According to totalism, we have decisive moral reason to do what makes the world go best, namely to produce the greatest possible net aggregate of well-being over ill-being. In the Non-Identity Case, choosing Great adds more to the total sum of wellbeing in the world than either Good or Nobody. So this is the option that, all else equal, we ought to pick, according to totalism. Hence, there is strong moral reason not to choose Good over Great, as (iii) affirms.

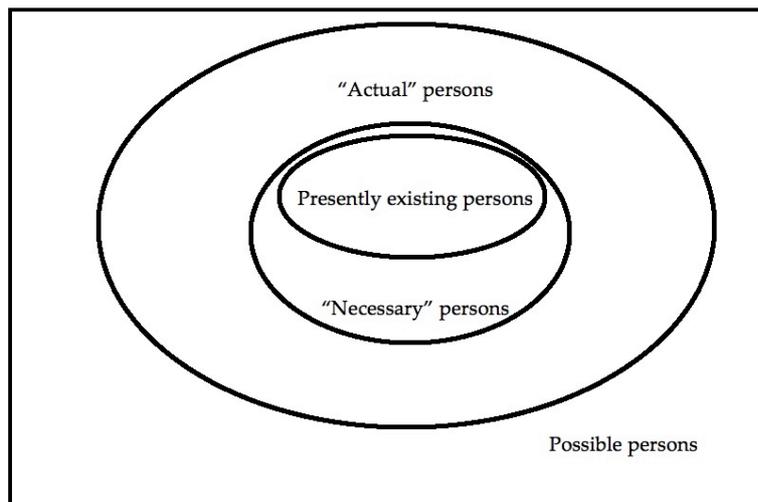
But the very feature which allows totalist utilitarians to provide an easy account of the Non-Identity Intuition also forces them to reject the second conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry. After all, creating a new person with a life worth living will also add to the total amount of wellbeing in the world. Hence, we have moral reason to do this. Thus, totalists can give the right answer to the Non-Identity Problem, but only at the price of giving up proposition (ii).

As we shall now see, most existing attempts to explain the Procreation Asymmetry have encountered the *reverse* problem. Though the details of their proposals differ, most authors who have tried to defend the Asymmetry intuition have pursued a common strategy: Totalism holds that the potential well-being of *all* possible people is reason-giving. By contrast, these alternative views divide up possible people according to their temporal location or their modal status, and assign different reason-giving force to the well-being of members in these various groups.<sup>12</sup> *Presentists* draw a distinction between presently existing and presently non-existing people, and claim that only the well-being of presently existing people provides us with any moral reasons; *necessitarians* distinguish between people (present or future) who exist or will exist no

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<sup>12</sup> The following definitions are derived from Gustaf Arrhenius, *Population Ethics: The Challenge of Future Generations* (ms.).

matter how we decide to act, and people whose existence is contingent on our decisions; *actualists* separate people who exist or who are going to exist in the actual world, on the one hand, from people who don't, and won't exist, on the other. (The Venn Diagram in *Figure 2* illustrates these ways of dividing up the space of possible people<sup>13</sup>). In each instance, we will see how the very feature that allows each of these accounts to capture one or both conjuncts of the Procreation Asymmetry commits it to rejecting the Non-Identity Intuition.



*Figure 2*

Consider first the 'generocentric' view of David Heyd. This view

(...) takes the present generation, viz. that making the demographic choice, as the only relevant group to which moral considerations are applicable. (...) The generocentric approach grants a moral standing only to those who 'generate' population growth, excluding such a standing from those who are 'generated', despite the fact that once they are 'generated' beings of this type are the same as their 'generators' and accordingly enjoy a moral status. In other words, decisions to enlarge the moral community are taken

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<sup>13</sup> This diagram is adapted from Arrhenius, *Population Ethics: The Challenge of Future Generations* (ms).

only 'from within' and in the light of the rights, welfare, and interests of the original community.<sup>14</sup>

Heyd's view in this passage is a form of presentism, since it draws a moral distinction between presently existing people and possible people who do not presently exist.<sup>15</sup> According to presentism, only the well-being of presently existing people gives us moral reasons of any kind. While this view captures the second conjunct of the Asymmetry intuition – that we have no reason to bring a possible person into existence just because her life would be worth living for her – it runs counter to the first. According to presentism, there is no welfare-related reason not to create a new person whose life would be miserable, since moral considerations stemming from people's welfare apply only to those who presently exist. For the same reason, we have no moral reason not to choose Good over Great in the Non-Identity Problem. Presentism is not a plausible view.

Consider next a proposal mooted by Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* as his best attempt to account for the Procreation Asymmetry. (Parfit himself rejects this proposal, for the reasons I elaborate below.<sup>16</sup>). According to the proposal,

[I]t is wrong, if other things are equal, to do what would be either bad for, or worse for, the people who ever live. It is therefore wrong to have the Wretched Child. Since his life is worse than nothing, having this child is bad for him. But it is in no way wrong to fail to have the Happy Child, whose life would be well worth living. True, if the couple had this child, this would be good for him. But if they do not have this child, this would not be bad for him.<sup>17</sup>

Parfit's proposal is a form of moral *actualism*. The only persons with regard to whom we have well-being-related reasons of any kind are *actual* people, i.e. the people who ever live, *given* our action. Other things being equal, it is wrong to do what is bad for, or worse for, these people. By

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<sup>14</sup> David Heyd, "Procreation and Value: Can Ethics Deal With Futurity Problems?", *Philosophia* 18 (1988): 151-170, pp. 158-9.

<sup>15</sup> There are other passages in which Heyd seems to endorse not presentism but necessitarianism. The problems with necessitarianism are discussed below.

<sup>16</sup> Parfit's proposal echoes a similar argument of Jan Narveson's, who, unlike Parfit, does appear to embrace moral actualism. See Jan Narveson, "Moral Problems of Population", *The Monist* (1973), p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> Parfit (1984), p. 150.

contrast, it is in no way wrong to fail to create a life that would have been worth living, since there are no moral reasons related to the well-being of people who, given our choice of action, will never live. Moral actualism thus entails what Parfit calls the *narrow person-affecting principle*, according to which something is bad (or an action is wrong) only if it is bad for, or worse for, someone who ever lives.

While it captures both conjuncts of the Procreation Asymmetry, the actualist proposal is subject to three serious objections, which give us reason to reject it.

First, it seems extremely plausible to embrace what Krister Bykvist calls

*Normative Invariance*: An action's normative status – whether it is right or wrong – does not depend on whether or not it is performed.

Actualism, however, violates Normative Invariance. After all, who the “actual” people *are*, whose interests we must take into account in acting, will often depend on which action we perform. For this reason, actualism will often fail to be action-*guiding* in different-person choices, since there is no morally correct answer to the question “what is the right thing to do?” prior to acting. In order to know how we *ought* to act, we would already know how we *will* act (which, of course, makes moral deliberation otiose).<sup>18</sup>

Second, actualism has the consequence that actions can be “self-condemning”, in the sense that, by performing the action, I make it the case that it was wrong to perform the action.<sup>19</sup> This can give rise to particularly vicious kinds of moral dilemmas, as the following case illustrates:

*Actualist's Dilemma*:

You face a forced choice between two options:

*Misery*: Create person A, who will live in agony for 25 years. Person D will never exist.

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<sup>18</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this point, to which I am indebted, see Krister Bykvist, “The Benefits of Coming into Existence”, *Philosophical Studies* 135.3 (2007), pp. 335-362.

<sup>19</sup> Similarly, actualism implies that actions can be “self-requiring”: If I create a new person with a life worth living, it will then be true that it would have been *wrong* not to create him. This is so, because, being actual, it matters morally that I do what is good for this person. By contrast, if I do not create this person, he is not actual, and hence I do not act wrongly in failing to create him.

*Super-Misery*: Create person D, who will live in agony for 50 years. Person A will never exist.

Actualism implies that you cannot but act wrongly in this case (whereas, intuitively, it seems that, although both options are awful, it is nevertheless right to choose Misery over Super-Misery, since person A will suffer less than D would if we picked Super-Misery). However, unlike in an ordinary moral dilemma, in which *all* available actions are assumed to be wrong, moral actualism implies that, however you act in this case, it will always be true that the available alternative would have been *right*: Thus, if you choose Misery and create person A, A's interests matter morally, but not D's, since D will never exist. Given this, it was wrong to choose Misery; you should have chosen Super-Misery instead, since this would not have been bad for A. Unfortunately, if you choose Super-Misery, it is now true that this option is wrong (because it is bad for D and now only D's interests matter); instead, choosing Misery would have been morally right.<sup>20</sup>

Third, like presentism, actualism is committed to denying the Non-Identity Intuition. Suppose that in the Non-Identity Case, you choose Good and create person B, who will have a moderately happy life, instead of person C, who would have had a very happy life. Intuitively, this is the wrong thing to do. Actualism, however, is committed to the opposite conclusion. Given your choice, person C never exists, so the fact that this person would have enjoyed a significantly better life than B is morally irrelevant, according to actualism, and provides us with no grounds for criticizing your choice. Nor can it be said that creating B is bad, or worse, for anyone who ever lives. B has a life that is well worth living for him and, by assumption, this is the best life that *he* could have had.

All told, it seems that the very feature of actualism that allows it to capture the Asymmetry intuition – namely that it allows us to discount in our moral deliberation the potential well-being of persons who never will exist, given our choice of action – commits it to denying the Non-Identity Intuition.

Finally, consider *asymmetrical necessitarianism*, a view recently discussed (but again, not endorsed) by Ben Bradley. Bradley writes:

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<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed discussion of a similar case, see Caspar Hare, "Voices From Another World: Must We Respect the Interests of People Who Do Not, and Will Never, Exist?", *Ethics* (2007), pp. 498-523.

Let us introduce a bit of jargon to state the view. Let us say that the N-utility of an act = (the total positive welfare for necessary people [i.e. those people who will exist no matter which alternative is performed] produced by the act) (...) minus (the total negative welfare produced by the act). Now we can state Asymmetrical Necessitarianism as follows:

AN: the welfare-related reason to do an act is proportional to the N-utility of the act.<sup>21</sup>

Like the actualist proposal, asymmetrical necessitarianism manages to capture both conjuncts of the Asymmetry Intuition. Under AN, the negative well-being produced if we create a life not worth living gives us a welfare-related reason against bringing such a person into existence. By contrast, positive welfare matters only if it accrues to a necessary person, i.e. to someone who will exist no matter how we choose to act. This isn't the case here, so there is no reason to create a new person just because her life would be worth living.

Once again, however, the proposal founders on the shoals of the Non-Identity Problem. Since only the well-being of *necessary* people gives you any welfare-related reasons, there is no reason not to pick Good over Great in *Non-Identity Case*, since neither persons B nor C will exist *no matter* how you choose to act. As was the case for presentism and actualism, the very feature that allows asymmetrical necessitarianism to capture the second conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry intuition prevents it from rendering the correct verdict in *Non-Identity Case*.

Presentism, actualism, and necessitarianism are all attempts to leave the totalist paradigm, and to find a more plausible basis for population ethics. The reason they fail, I believe, is that they all focus on the wrong *aspect* of totalism, while letting its crucial assumption go unchallenged. As I shall explain in greater detail in the following section, the crucial assumption behind totalism is about the *kind* of welfare-related reasons that we have. According to the totalist, potential well-being matters in exactly one way: it provides us with an *unconditional* (or *categorical*) reason to *bring it about* (be it by benefiting an existing person, or by creating a new person with a life worth living). Presentism, actualism, necessitarianism, and other views of this kind leave this crucial assumption largely unchallenged. They agree that, *if* a person's well-being matters, it can

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<sup>21</sup> Ben Bradley, "Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming, and Creating", *The Journal of Ethics* 17 (2013): 37-49.

matter only as an unconditional reason to bring about the state of affairs in which this well-being exists. They only depart from totalism by circumscribing the class of persons *whose* well-being matters (only the present people's, only the actual people's, only the necessary people's).

As we have seen, while the proposed modifications to totalism allows these alternative views to capture the second conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry, they simultaneously force them to deny the Non-Identity Intuition. Try to solve the Non-Identity Problem instead, by affirming totalism, and the solution to the Asymmetry collapses.

It is time to try a new approach. In the remainder of this essay, I argue that the Asymmetry must be explained, not by challenging totalism on *whose* well-being matters, but on *how* well-being matters, i.e. on the *kinds* of welfare-related reasons that we have in procreative contexts.<sup>22</sup>

#### 4. Teleology and its Discontents

Totalist utilitarianism is a *teleological* moral theory. What is characteristic of the teleological perspective in modern-day moral philosophy is not just that it takes evaluative notions such as "value" or "good" to be prior to the right. More importantly, what marks a moral view out as distinctly teleological are its claims about the *kinds* of reasons we have with regard to that which is good or valuable. According to the teleologist, the appropriate response to what is good or valuable is to *promote* it, ensuring that as much of it exists as possible; the proper response to disvalue is to prevent it, or to ensure that as little of it exists as possible.<sup>23</sup>

Some teleological thinkers, such as G.E. Moore, see such a close connection between goodness and its promotion that Moore often characterizes the good in terms of "what ought to exist". For Moore,

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<sup>22</sup> One philosopher who shares my diagnosis that it won't be possible to explain the Asymmetry by dividing up potential persons according to their temporal or modal status into those whose well-being matters and those whose well-being doesn't matter is Melinda Roberts. (See, for instance, Melinda Roberts "The Asymmetry: A Solution", *Theoria* 77 (2011), pp. 333-367). Since Roberts's approach has certain commonalities with the proposal I offer in this paper, it is worth giving a more detailed account of why I regard her proposed solution to the Asymmetry as unsatisfactory. I do so in Appendix A.

<sup>23</sup> For this way of characterizing the commitments of teleological views, see, for instance, Philip Pettit, "Consequentialism" in Peter Singer (ed.) *Blackwell's Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 230-33; T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1998), pp. 79-80; and Selim Berker, "Epistemic Teleology and the Separateness of Propositions", *The Philosophical Review* 122.3 (2013), pp. 341-48. In the following, I am particularly indebted to Berker's discussion.

ethical questions can be divided into two kinds. The first concerns the good: what things “ought to exist for their own sakes?”<sup>24</sup> The second is about the right: “What kind of actions ought we to perform?”<sup>25</sup> One of Moore’s central claims is that the latter kind of question can be reduced to the former. What action it is right to perform in a given situation reduces to the question which available action would produce the most good: “To assert that a certain line of conduct is, at a given time, absolutely right or obligatory is obviously to assert that more good or less evil will exist in the world, if it be adopted than if anything else be done instead”.<sup>26</sup> Thus, for Moore and other teleologists, our moral reasons are *state-regarding* reasons, since they are reasons to cause what is valuable to exist and what is disvaluable not to exist.<sup>27</sup>

Next, note that viewing some value *F* as to be promoted implies that there is no deep moral distinction between increasing the degree to which *F* is realized amongst *existing* potential bearers of that value, and creating *new* bearers of that value. These are both just ways of making it the case that more of what is valuable or good exists in the world. That is, someone who views a value *F* as to be promoted affirms the following

*Transfer Thesis*: If there is reason to increase the extent to which *F* is instantiated amongst existing potential bearers, there is also reason to increase the extent to which *F* is instantiated by *creating* new bearers of *F*.

This thought is at the root of the totalist utilitarian’s rejection of the Procreation Asymmetry: if well-being is good or valuable, as witnessed by the fact that we want the lives of existing people to contain as much well-being as possible, then surely the fact that the lives of potential new people would also contain well-being must constitute a reason for creating these people.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, ed., with an introduction by Thomas Baldwin, rev. ed., with the preface to the (projected) 2d ed. and other papers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 33.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> Even paradigmatically non-consequentialist ethical theories like W.D. Ross’s can have teleological *elements*. Thus, in *The Right and the Good* Ross argues that goodness is “an intrinsic quality of certain things,” such as pleasure, knowledge, and virtue. “What we ought to do,” he says, “depends to a large extent (...) on the goodness or the badness of the things we can in our acts bring into being.”

<sup>28</sup> Teleologists about well-being need not endorse a further controversial claim sometimes attributed to Moore, namely that what is *good for* people is so only if, *and because*, it is good

If we accept the thought that the unique appropriate response to what is good or valuable is to promote it, this also has implications for the kinds of things that we can think of as ultimately valuable.<sup>29</sup> For only certain kinds of things *can* be promoted: Specifically, note that promoting is not really a response that it is possible to have towards *particular* concrete entities, such as particular persons or animals. What could it mean to “promote” Tim Scanlon, or Baloo the bear? Rather, what can be promoted are *abstracta*, such as properties (well-being; wisdom) or universals (bears), which we can cause to be realized or instantiated to a greater or lesser extent in a state of affairs.

Much of what makes totalist utilitarianism unattractive to many people has its root in this focus on abstracta over particular beings and entities: For one thing, a focus on promoting as the unique response to what is good or valuable sidelines a whole range of valuing attitudes that we have specifically towards particulars: cherishing, respecting, loving, caring for, honoring, etc. For another, it feeds a common criticism of utilitarianism, namely that it treats people as *fungible* and views them in a *quasi-instrumental* fashion. Instrumental valuing is an attitude that we have towards particulars. However, to value something instrumentally is to value it, in essence, for its causal properties. But these same causal properties could just as well be instantiated by some other particular thing. Hence, insofar as a particular entity is valued only instrumentally, it is regarded as fungible. Similarly, a teleological view which regards our welfare-related reasons as purely state-regarding can be accused of taking a quasi-instrumental approach towards people. It views them as fungible receptacles for well-being, not as mattering qua individuals.<sup>30</sup> Totalist

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*impersonally*, “from the point of view of the universe”. (For a contemporary defense of this view, see Donald Regan, “Why Am I my Brother’s Keeper?” in Wallace, Pettit, Scheffler and Smith, eds., *Reason and Value: Themes from the Moral Philosophy of Joseph Raz*, pp. 202-230). For some central components of well-being, such as sensory pleasure, it is far more plausible to think of the dependence relationship between “good impersonally” and “good for people” as being the other way around. See T. M. Scanlon, “Ideas of the Good in Moral and Political Philosophy” in Mark Timmons (ed.) *Oxford Studies in Normative Ethics*, Volume 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> As noted by Berker (2013), p. 344.

<sup>30</sup> Note that a modified utilitarian view, according to which we have reason to promote not well-being *per se*, but *happy lives*, would face similar objections. Although such a view could not be accused of regarding people as mere *receptacles* or *loci* of what ultimately matters (namely well-being), it would still regard individual happy people as fungible constitutive means towards achieving our ultimate goal, namely to bring about a state of affairs in which as many happy lives as possible are lived. For an interesting discussion of these common objections to totalist utilitarianism, see Richard Yetter Chappell, “Value Receptacles”, *Noûs* 49.2 (2015), pp. 322–332.

utilitarianism, it is often said, does not take persons sufficiently seriously. By treating the moral significance of persons and their well-being as *derivative* of their contribution to valuable states of affairs, it *reverses* what strikes most of us as the correct order of dependence.<sup>31</sup> Human wellbeing matters because people matter – *not vice versa*.

I have focused on totalist utilitarianism in this section, not because I believe that it is the only, or indeed the most plausible, basis on which philosophers tend to reject the Procreation Asymmetry and endorse a symmetry view. One alternative, is a version of the *wide person-affecting principle*, first discussed by Derek Parfit in Chapter 18 of *Reasons and Persons*. According to this view, we have moral reason to bring about that outcome which gives to people the greatest total net sum of benefits, where these include the *existential* benefits to people of being brought into existence. Like totalist utilitarianism, this wide person-affecting view rejects the Asymmetry, but does so for a different reason: all else equal, it is claimed, we have reason to create new happy lives because doing so will benefit *people* more, not because we have state-regarding reason to bring about a state of affairs in which the value of wellbeing is maximally promoted. We shall return to wide person-affecting views in the following section.

Rather, the reason I have focused on totalist utilitarianism is because reflecting on the shortcomings of this view strikes me as the easiest way to recognize the attractions of an alternate way of conceiving the reason-giving force of well-being. According to my proposal, which I sketch in the next section, whatever moral reasons we have to confer well-being on people are not state-regarding but what I call *bearer-dependent* reasons. As we shall see, if *this* is the correct way to think of the reason-giving force of well-being, then the Asymmetry becomes not just relatively straightforward to explain, but indeed hard to resist.

## 5. Bearer-Dependent Reasons and the Second Conjunct of the Asymmetry

My strategy for defending the Procreative Asymmetry begins by locating it in a wider normative phenomenon. It is striking that a teleological approach, according to which our moral reasons relating to some value F

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<sup>31</sup> For a penetrating discussion of this point, to which I am indebted, see Ralf Bader, “Aggregating v. Balancing” (ms).

must be state-regarding reasons to *promote* F, seems even more problematic for moral values *other than* well-being.

Consider, for instance, the value of justice: The thought that it is good to achieve justice is not a free-floating claim about valuable states of affairs. Rather, we believe, the demands of justice have their source in *other persons*, as beings that are capable of having and responding to reasons, and of choosing and revising their ends. As such, they have the standing to demand of us certain appropriate attitudes and behaviors, amongst which is a reciprocal willingness to structure our shared institutions and social interactions in a manner that is justifiable to all. Given that we are surrounded by such beings, social interaction with which gives rise to demands of justice, we also have reason to think that the world is better, all things equal, if we succeed in treating one another justly. But this thought is a *derivative* one, which follows from the normative reasons we have to structure our institutions and social interactions in a way that is justifiable to all. It does not flow from the belief that justice is a value that ought to be maximally instantiated. Indeed, it would plainly be absurd to think of justice as a value to be promoted in the sense of the Transfer Thesis – such that we could have moral reason to create new persons *just in order* that they may treat one another justly. If that were the case, the claims of justice would be limitless. It would be impossible *in principle* to achieve a situation that is ‘perfect’ from the point of view of justice; for we could always promote this value further by creating new people whose relationships with other persons also instantiate the value of justice.

Similar remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to many other values: liberty, equality, fairness, honesty, fidelity, loyalty, promise keeping, gratitude, charity, health, safety, etc. None of these values appear even remotely plausible as candidates for “promotion” in the sense of the Transfer Thesis. For instance, while we recognize strong moral reasons to make people free and equal, freedom and equality clearly do not require us to create *new* people so that they, too, may instantiate these values.

Indeed, it is striking that in thinking about these other values, we soon notice asymmetries that are structurally analogous to the claims of the Procreation Asymmetry. Consider the case of promise-keeping: Most of us believe that we have a moral reason not to make a promise that we won’t be able to keep. (Compare: we have a moral reason not to create a life that will unavoidably be not worth living). By contrast, we do not think that we have a reason *to make* a promise *just because* we will be able to keep it (Compare: we do not think we have a moral reason to create a new life, *just because* that life will be worth living). As Holly Smith remarks, “keeping a promise does not seem to add any moral value to the world

that must be taken into account when deciding whether to make that promise.”<sup>32</sup>

My contention is that there is indeed a common moral phenomenon which explains why all moral values, including the value of human well-being, are prone to exhibit intuitive asymmetries similar to the one that we observe in the case of procreation. But, for simplicity of exposition, I will focus on exploring only the parallel between the procreation and promising asymmetries.

In the case of promising, it is not hard to see why I have no reason to make a promise, just because I can keep it: Any reasons to keep our promises are *conditional* reasons, namely conditional on the promise being made. Making a promise, on the account I favor, involves the promisor giving the promisee a claim-right to a certain future action on the part of the promisor. In language that will be helpful when comparing promising to procreation, we could say that the act of promising involves “creating” a promisee, i.e. creating a *bearer* of a promissory claim-right, and that any reasons to keep a promise are conditional on the existence of such a promisee. If this is correct, it is plain to see why there could not be an unconditional *promissory* reason to (make and keep a promise).<sup>33</sup> For any reason to keep a promise is *conditional* on the existence of the bearer of a promissory claim-right. Our reasons to keep promises are, to coin a new term, *bearer-dependent* reasons.

My central claim in this section is going to be that any moral reasons we have to confer benefits on a person S are likewise bearer-dependent, in the sense that they are *conditional* on S’s existence.<sup>34</sup> If this is correct, it will explain the second conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry. There is no unconditional moral reason to create a person, just on account of the benefits we would thereby confer on her, since any welfare-related reasons to confer benefits on a person are conditional on her existence.

Here is how I propose to establish this claim. According to the totalist utilitarian view that I criticized in the previous section, people and their well-being matter *in virtue of* contributing to good *states of affairs*. This

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<sup>32</sup> Holly M. Smith, “A Paradox of Promising”, *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (April 1997), p. 183.

<sup>33</sup> Though there could be other sorts of reasons for doing so, for example, to prove one’s trustworthiness.

<sup>34</sup> “Conditional on S’s existence” should be understood, here and in the following, in a *timeless* sense, i.e. as “conditional on the fact that S *ever* exists” (either now or in the future). Provided that it is a fact that some presently non-existing person S will exist in the future, we can right now have bearer-dependent reasons to confer benefits on S (for instance, by conserving resources which S will require once he comes into existence).

view, I contended, *reverses* the true order of dependence, taking the significance of persons and their well-being to be *derivative* of their contribution to good states of affairs.

The truth is almost exactly the opposite. I affirm:

*Claim 1:* It matters that people have well-being just if, *and because*, people matter.

Claim 1 employs the term “mattering” in two distinct senses that we should distinguish: First, there is what we may call the *state-regarding sense* of ‘mattering’. It is the sense involved in statements of the form “It matters that p”, where p is a proposition that describes some state of affairs or way the world can go. To affirm that “it matters that p”, in this state-regarding sense, is roughly to assert that it is not morally indifferent whether p is true or not. There are reasons to make it the case that p and/or to have a pro-attitude towards p’s being the case.

Second, there is what we can call the *bearer-regarding sense* of ‘mattering’. This is the sense involved in statements of the form “S matters”, where S is not some state of affairs, but a particular being or thing. In the case where S is a person, to affirm that “S matters” is, very roughly, to assert that that it is not morally indifferent how S fares and is treated. We have (moral) reasons to regulate our conduct and attitudes in certain ways out of consideration for S’s interests, rights, and claims. The generic plural statement “S’s matter” (e.g. “people matter”) can be read as affirming: “It is true for any S that S matters in the bearer-regarding sense”.

Claim 1 can thus be read as affirming that any moral reasons that we have to make it the case that people have well-being (or to have a pro-attitude towards the obtaining of this state of affairs) are true in virtue of, and derivative of, the fact that individual people matter in the bearer-regarding sense.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> A number of philosophers affirm views that are similar to Claim 1. See in particular Stephen Darwall, *Welfare and Rational Care* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), Chapter 1 and Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in Ethics and Economics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). For Anderson, in particular, something like Claim 1 falls out of a broader view, according to which states of affairs *in general* are valuable only “extrinsically”. By this she means that the fact that certain states of affairs matter, in the state-regarding sense, is *derivative* of the fact that some things matter in the bearer-regarding sense. More precisely, those states of affairs that matter, in the state-regarding sense, are precisely those states of affairs that we have reason to bring about *because* some being or thing S matters in the bearer-regarding sense. As she writes:

Next, let us ask: Why do individual people matter in the bearer-regarding sense? To give a detailed response to this question is beyond the scope of this paper, but for my present purposes a schematic answer is sufficient. I believe that most moral philosophers would subscribe to something like the following:

*Claim 2:* A person *S* matters, in the bearer-regarding sense, just if, and because, *S* has moral status, which in turn is grounded in various properties of *S*.

There are many competing views about what properties of a person ground her moral status, but my argument does not depend on any particular view about the grounds of moral status. I will just mention my own view, which is that a person *S*'s moral status is grounded in the fact that *S* has a good and is capable of having reasons and choosing ends. But, to repeat, nothing rides on this being the correct account of the grounds of moral status for persons.

I will now show that, given Claims 1 and 2, there is an argument for the second conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry that has not, to my knowledge, been made before.

Let *w* be a world such that the following proposition (A) is true:

(A) It is not the case that *S* is happy in *w*.

When, and why, is it a matter of moral concern that (A) is true? It seems that

Only if *S*'s well-being matters, in the state-regarding sense, is it a matter of moral concern that (A) is true.

However, according to Claim 1,

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(...) states of affairs, whether they be final aims or mere means, are for the most part only *extrinsically* valuable. It makes sense for a person to value most of them only *because* it makes sense for a person to care about the people, animals, communities, and things concerned with them. (*Value in Ethics and Economics*, p. 20)

While I am in sympathy with Anderson's thesis that states of affairs in general are only extrinsically valuable, I need not affirm anything as broad as Anderson's thesis in mounting my defense of the Procreation Asymmetry.

S's well-being matters, in the state-regarding sense, just if, and because, S matters, in the bearer-regarding sense.

And, according to Claim 2,

S matters, in the bearer-regarding sense, just if, and because, S has moral status, which in turn is grounded in various properties of S [such as the fact that S has a good and is capable of having reasons and choosing ends].

However,

Only if S exists in *w* does S possess those properties [such as having a good and being capable of having reasons and choosing ends] that ground her moral status in *w*.

Therefore,

The truth of (A) is of moral concern *only if S exists in w*.

By contrast, if S does not exist in *w*, (A) will also be true. That is, it will also be true that "it is not the case that S is happy in *w*." But in that case, the fact that (A) is true is *not* a matter of moral concern. For in that case, there exists no person whose moral status gives us reasons to care about his happiness (or lack thereof). Hence, if by failing to create a person S who would have been happy in *w*, we make it the case that (A) is true, this is not a matter of moral concern. To paraphrase Jonathan Bennett: while we have reason to deplore the situation where a person lacks happiness, there is no reason to deplore a situation where happiness lacks a person.<sup>36</sup>

But,

If it is not a matter of moral concern that we fail to create a person who could have a happy life, this means that there is no moral reason to create a person, just because that person could have a happy life.

For if there were such a reason, the failure to comply with this reason *would* be a matter of moral concern.

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<sup>36</sup> Jonathan Bennett, "On Maximizing Happiness" in R. I. Sikora and B. Barry (eds.), *Obligations to Future Generations* (Temple University Press, 1978), pp. 61–73.

From the fact that creating S would constitute an existential benefit to S, we therefore cannot infer that there is a moral reason of beneficence to create S. Reasons to confer benefits on a person S, I have argued, obtain only *conditional* on S's existence. They do not give us *unconditional* reasons to bring S into existence.

If this is so, the wide person-affecting view mentioned in the previous section is revealed to be an unstable halfway house. The wide person-affecting view correctly departs from totalism in reversing the priority relationship between people and states of affairs. Our moral reasons to confer wellbeing on people are not state-regarding but bearer-dependent reasons. However, proponents of the wide person-affecting view fail to take this realization to its logical conclusion, namely that we have no moral reason of beneficence to create new lives, just because they will be happy. If our moral reasons to be concerned with S's happiness derive, not from the contribution it makes to a valuable state of affairs, but rather from S *himself*, then, in a world where S himself is absent, there is no moral reason to lament the absence of S's potential happiness.

If this argument goes through, I have shown how jettisoning the totalist utilitarian's view of well-being as something to be promoted in favor of a more attractive view, according to which a person's well-being matters just if, and because, the person matters, lends support to the second conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry. Moreover it does so in a way that offers a principled response to the Objection from Benefit: if our reasons to benefit other people are *conditional* on the fact of their existence, this explains why we often have weighty moral reasons to provide *ordinary* benefits (which accrue to people who either already exist or will exist independently of our action), but no moral reasons to provide *existential* benefits to people by bringing them into existence.

At the same time, nothing I have said in this section calls into question the first conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry, i.e. the claim that we *do* have moral reason to avoid creating lives that will foreseeably be miserable. For the world in which I create S with a miserable life is precisely a world in which proposition (A) above is true, and this fact *is* of moral concern, *since S exists at that world*. We do have moral reason to deplore a situation where a person lacks happiness. Hence, a bearer-dependent view, according to which our moral reasons to *confer* wellbeing on a person are conditional on the fact of that person's existence is in no way incompatible with us having a categorical reason to avoid creating miserable lives.

We thus have a clear path towards a non question-begging explanation of *both* conjuncts of the Procreation Asymmetry, and with it a response to the Objection from Symmetry.

## 6. Moral Standards and the Procreation Asymmetry

I now embark on the third and final part of my paper. My aim in what follows is to develop a *unified* account of the morality of procreation, which makes sense of all the intuitive data so far discussed, namely both conjuncts of the Procreation Asymmetry, as well as our moral judgments about the *Same-Person Case* and the *Non-Identity Case*.

In so doing, it will be helpful to first introduce a new bit of terminology, that of *normative standard*. Characterizing our moral reasons with regard to procreation in terms of this notion gives us a simple way of capturing both conjuncts of the Asymmetry Intuition. The concept of normative standard also enables us to render explicit the structural parallels with other normative asymmetries, such as the promissory asymmetry we considered above. In Section 7, I then argue that our “standard-regarding” reasons are best expressed in the form of *wide-scope* conditional reasons. Finally, in Sections 8 and 9, I show how this framework can be extended to account for our intuitions about the Same-Person Case and the Non-Identity Case respectively.

A normative standard, as I shall use the term, is a criterion of evaluation that applies to those outcomes of an agent’s actions that fall within the *scope* of the standard. An outcome can either *fail* to satisfy the standard, in which case there are “standard-regarding” reasons to avoid this outcome, or it can *pass* (or *satisfy*) the standard, in which case there are no standard-regarding reasons against bringing it about. That in virtue of which a standard has normative force, I call its *ground*. The scope of the standard is coextensive with those outcomes in which its ground ever exists. If the ground never exists in some outcome, the standard does not apply to that outcome, and consequently we can have no standard-regarding reasons against bringing it about.

Let us consider some examples to familiarize ourselves with this notion. Suppose I am deliberating whether to promise you to walk your dog tomorrow. (See *Figure 3*). I know that, if I make you this promise, my subsequent actions will be subject to a new moral standard. I can satisfy this standard (by walking your dog tomorrow) or fail it (by breaking my promise and not walking your dog). Thus, conditional on making the promise today, I have a standard-regarding reason to walk your dog

tomorrow. What grounds the moral force of this standard is that in both outcomes that I can bring about, conditional on having promised to walk your dog, you are the bearer of a promissory claim-right concerning my actions tomorrow. By contrast, if I do not make you this promise, I remain free to do as I please, at least as far as the promissory standard is concerned. For in this case, there is nothing that grounds a promissory reason to behave in any particular way tomorrow. My actions fall outside the scope of the promissory standard.<sup>37</sup>

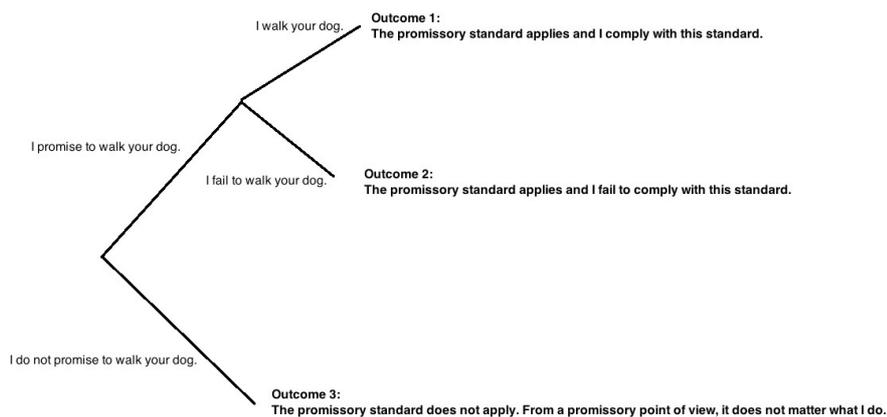


Figure 3

Suppose, next, that I can foresee that, having made you the promise, I will be unable to keep it. That is, in Figure 3, if I make the promise, I will unavoidably bring about Outcome 2, in which I fail the promissory standard. Knowing this, I have a standard-regarding reason to *avoid making* the promise in the first place. More generally, there is a standard-regarding reason to avoid bringing about an outcome to which a normative standard applies and in which I am unable to satisfy that standard.

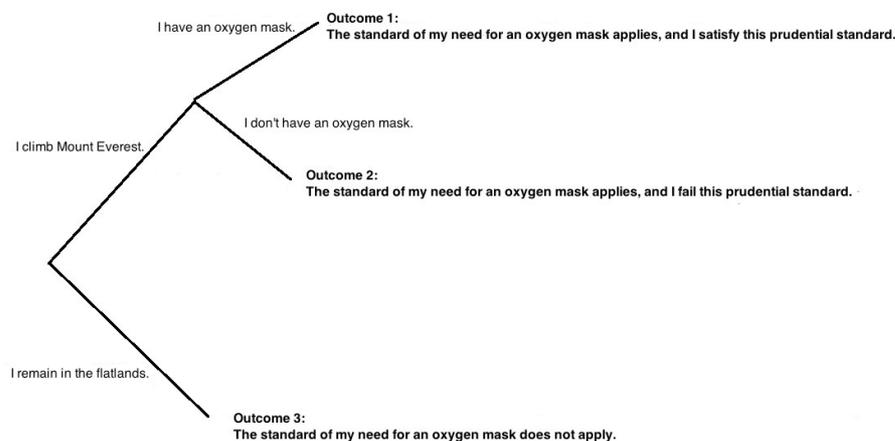
By contrast, there can be no standard-regarding reason against producing an outcome which is *not* governed by that standard. Thus, there can be no *promissory* reason against not making a promise, even a promise that I could keep. Hence, given a choice between bringing about an outcome to which a standard applies and that standard is satisfied, and

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<sup>37</sup> The case of promising can also be used to explain why I wrote above that “the scope of [a normative] standard is coextensive with those outcomes in which its ground *ever* exists.” This “timeless” formulation is needed in order to capture the fact that we can have moral reasons to keep promises that we made to people who no longer exist.

bringing about an outcome that is outside the scope of the standard, I have no standard-regarding reasons to do the former rather than the latter.

The notion of a normative standard is also helpful in thinking about cases where our reasons are *prudential*, not moral, in nature. Suppose I am thinking of climbing Mount Everest (*Figure 4*). I know that, at that altitude, I will need a functioning oxygen mask – a need that I won’t have if I don’t climb the mountain. In *Figure 4*, Outcomes 1 and 2, in which I climb the mountain, are thus subject to a prudential standard – the standard of my need for a functioning oxygen mask – which does not apply to the outcome in which I remain in the flatlands. Here again, the fact that I foreseeably will be unable to satisfy a prudential standard gives me a reason to avoid outcomes to which that standard applies: The fact that I don’t have a functioning oxygen mask gives me a reason not to attempt the climb. By contrast, the fact that I could satisfy a prudential standard



*Figure 4*

does not, *in itself*, give me a reason to bring about an outcome to which this standard applies and is satisfied, rather than an outcome that falls outside the scope of this prudential standard: The mere fact that I have a functioning oxygen mask does not give me a reason to climb Mount Everest!

Consider, finally, how the notion of a normative standard can help us to explain both halves of the Procreation Asymmetry (*Figure 5*). I claim that any outcome in which I create a new person S is subject to a moral standard (that of S’s well-being), which is grounded in the existence of S, a being with moral status. This moral standard is satisfied if S has a life that is at least worth living, and failed if she has a life that is not worth living. By contrast, the standard of S’s well-being does not apply to an outcome in which I do not create S.

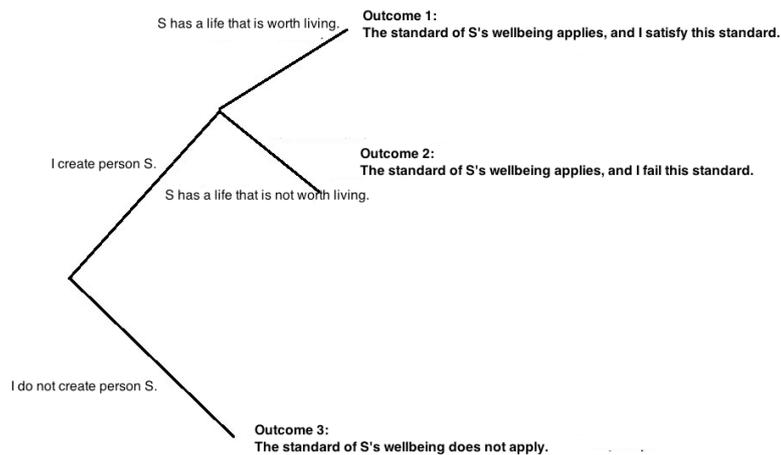


Figure 5

If I am unable to give S a life that is worth living, I have a standard-regarding reason not to create S. This captures the first conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry. By contrast, the mere fact that I could create a person S whose life would be worth living does not give me a moral reason to do so. For I have no standard-regarding reason to bring about an outcome to which the standard of S's well-being applies and that standard is satisfied, rather than an outcome that falls outside of the scope of this normative standard. This captures the second conjunct of the Asymmetry.

Before I go on, let me pause to briefly comment on the dialectic of this and the previous section: Attentive readers will have noticed that the notion of normative standard is itself asymmetrical. There are standard-regarding reasons not to bring about an outcome to which a normative standard applies and that standard is failed, whereas there are *no* standard-regarding reasons to bring about an outcome to which a normative standard applies and that standard is complied with. For this reason, it would have been question-begging to appeal directly to the notion of normative standard in seeking to explain the Procreation Asymmetry, without first giving an *independent* argument for the claim that we have no moral reasons to create a person just because her life will be worth living. That is why the argument of the preceding section, in defense of the second conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry, was indispensable. With that argument in place, I could *then* appeal to the notion of normative standard to provide a *unified* account of both conjuncts of the Procreation Asymmetry, without begging any questions.

## 7. Standard-Regarding Reasons as Wide-Scope Conditional Reasons

While the notion of a “normative standard” is novel, I believe that our standard-regarding reasons can be captured in terms of a more familiar concept – that of conditional reason.

Conditional reasons come in two basic forms, depending on whether the reason-operator takes wide or narrow scope:

*A narrow-scope conditional reason:* If I do p, I have reason to do q.

*A wide-scope conditional reason:* I have reason to (if I do p, do q).

I believe that the correct way to capture standard-regarding reasons is in terms of wide-scope conditional reasons. With regard to the case of procreation, I affirm the following *wide-scope* conditional reason:

*The Threshold Requirement:* I have a moral reason to (if I create a new person, make it the case that this person’s life is at least worth living).<sup>38</sup>

Suppose that the Threshold Requirement had instead been presented as a *narrow-scope* requirement:

*The Threshold Requirement (narrow-scope reading):* If I create a new person, I have a moral reason to make it the case that this person’s life is at least worth living.

This way of formulating the Threshold Requirement faces a decisive objection. It lacks the resources to explain how I could have an unconditional reason *not* to create a child whose life will be irredeemably miserable. According to the narrow-scope reading, *any* reasons that I have with regard to my future child’s well-being – and not just any reasons to *confer* well-being on the child – are reasons that I acquire *only upon it being the case that I create that child*. But if any welfare-related reasons that I have

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<sup>38</sup> As will become clear in the following two sections, I believe that this Threshold Requirement is part of, but does not *exhaust*, our standard-regarding reasons with regard to procreation.

with regard to a potential future person take effect only once it is the case that I create this person, I will necessarily lack any welfare-related reason to *avoid* creating an irredeemably miserable life in the first place. The narrow-scope reading thus lacks the resources to explain the first conjunct of the Asymmetry.

Does the wide-scope reading fare any better? At first blush, it, too, faces a serious obstacle: It is uncontroversial that narrow-scope conditional reasons allow for what deontic logicians call *factual detachment*: The narrow-scope conditional reason “If I do p, I have a reason to do q”, together with the factual premise “I do p”, allow me to deduce the *unconditional* statement “I have a reason to do q”.

By contrast, when the reason-operator takes *wide-scope*, it is commonly thought that the detachment of unconditional reasons is illicit. In this respect, the “reason” operator is thought to behave like the alethic operator “necessarily”. The following argument, involving factual detachment of the necessarily-operator, is clearly invalid:

*Necessarily* (If there is water in the glass, something is in the glass).

There is water in the glass.

∴ *Necessarily* (Something is in the glass).

Indeed, it is this supposed resistance to factual detachment which recommends wide-scope conditional reasons to some philosophers in other contexts. According to a popular account of instrumental reason, for instance, the instrumental principle takes the form of a wide-scope conditional reason:

I have a reason to (if I have end E and doing M is the known necessary means to E, do M).<sup>39</sup>

Philosophers who embrace such wide-scope accounts of instrumental reason<sup>40</sup> do so precisely in order to avoid problems that would be created by factual detachment. For example, an account of instrumental reason would be unsatisfactory if it implied that I have an unconditional reason to take the necessary means to my evil ends, or that I have a reason to perform evil actions, provided they are the necessary means to my ends.

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<sup>39</sup> See, for instance, Simon Rippon, “In Defense of the Wide-Scope Instrumental Principle”, *Journal of Ethics and Social Philosophy* 5.2 (2011), pp. 1-21.

<sup>40</sup> For the record: I am not one of them.

Nonetheless, I believe that two more limited detachment rules can be defended. They are inherently plausible and solve the problem at hand, but without endangering the viability of analyses of instrumental reason in terms of wide-scope conditional reasons.

Following Patricia Greenspan<sup>41</sup>, I propose a new operator and two new detachment rules for wide-scope conditional reasons. According to Rule 1, the unconditional reason “I have a reason to do q” will be derivable from the wide-scope conditional reason “I have reason to (if I do p, do q)” and “U(I do p)”. U is a new operator, which asserts that the truth of the proposition within its scope is *unalterable* by the agent at the time of action. This will typically be true in cases where I have already made the proposition true, and can no longer make it false. In such cases, where I am no longer able to satisfy the wide-scope conditional reason by making its antecedent false, Rule 1 implies that I have an unconditional reason to make the consequent true.

Rule 2 is the contrapositive of this. Given the wide-scope conditional reason “I have reason to (if I do p, do q)” and “U~(I do q)”, I can detach an unconditional reason *not* to do p.

These two new detachment rules for wide-scope conditional reason both strike me as highly plausible. What is more, they allow me to provide an explanation of both conjuncts of the Procreation Asymmetry within a unified framework, where any reasons to *confer* well-being on a person are *conditional* on the fact of her existence. Consider again the Threshold Requirement I presented above:

*The Threshold Requirement:* I have a moral reason to (if I create a new person, make it the case that this person’s life is at least worth living).

According to Rule 2, if it is unavoidably true that, should I create a certain child, I will fail to make it the case that this child can have a life worth living (for instance because, due to a severe congenital ailment, the child’s life would be irredeemably miserable), I have an *unconditional* reason not to create this child. Thus, together with Rule 2, the wide-scope reading of the Threshold Requirement allows me to affirm the first conjunct of the Procreation Asymmetry. At the same time, there is *no* unconditional reason under the Threshold Requirement to create a child, just because I will be able to give it a life worth living. This is in line with

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<sup>41</sup> Patricia Greenspan, “Conditional Oughts and Hypothetical Imperatives,” *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 259-76.

the second conjunct of the Procreative Asymmetry, and allows me to meet the Objection from Symmetry. Rather, any reason to confer well-being on the child is *conditional* on that child's existence. Only once the proposition "I create a child" is unavoidably true — typically, once I *have* created the child — does Rule 1 allow me to detach an unconditional moral reason to make it the case that the child has a life that is at least worth living.<sup>42</sup>

My proposal also avoids the bootstrapping problem for wide-scope accounts of instrumental reason which I alluded to above. The problem, to recapitulate, is that I should not be able to infer an unconditional reason to take the necessary means to my ends from a wide-scope reason of the form

I have a reason to (if I have end E and doing M is the known, necessary means to E, do M).

plus the mere fact that I have these ends; otherwise, I could in principle have a reason to do anything, however immoral, as long as this was a known, necessary means to some end of mine.

My proposal avoids this problem, since Rule 1 applies only to cases where it is *unavoidable* at the time of action that the antecedent of the wide-scope conditional reason is made true. But this will never be the case for situations governed by the instrumental principle: at any time when I can still take (or fail to take) the necessary means to my end (i.e. at any time

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<sup>42</sup> A structurally parallel account of the morality of promising in terms of wide-scope conditional reasons also seems very plausible:

*Promising Requirement*: I have moral reason to (if I make a promise, keep that promise).

Together with Rule 2, the Promising Requirement allows us to account for the promissory asymmetry noted in Sections 5 and 6: If, conditional on making a promise, I will be unable to keep it, I have an unconditional moral reason against making the promise in the first place. By contrast, there is no promissory reason to make a promise, just because I can keep it, since any moral reason I have to keep a promise is conditional on my having made that promise.

The application of Rule 1, on the other hand, is slightly complicated by the possibility of promissory *release*. Even having made a promise, the fact that there is a promisee with a claim-right to my performance of the promised action need not, in the relevant sense, be *unalterable*. If I can get the promisee to release me from my promise, I no longer have a promissory reason to do as promised — roughly put, it is as if I had never made the promise. Hence, unlike creating a person, making a promise need not, in the relevant sense, be an *irreversible* act. It is nonetheless true that, *if* the antecedent of the Promising Requirement is, in the relevant sense, unalterably true (because I have made a promise and *cannot* get the promisee to release me), Rule 1 implies that I have an unconditional moral reason to keep my promise.

when the instrumental principle gets a grip on me), I can also give up my end instead. Hence, it is never the case that, while I can still decide whether or not to do M, it is already unavoidable that the antecedent is true (i.e. that I have end E, to which M is the necessary means). Hence, Rule 1 will never be applicable to the instrumental principle.

## 8. The Same-Person Case and the Maximization Requirement

Although the Threshold Requirement, by itself, accounts for both conjuncts of the Procreation Asymmetry, it does not capture all our well-being-related reasons in procreation. For instance, the Threshold Requirement cannot explain our confident intuition about the *Same-Person Case*, namely that given a three-way choice between Nobody, Good, and Better, you have strong moral reason not to choose Good over Better. This is because even in Good, the child you create will have a life that is at least worth living, and hence the Threshold Requirement will be satisfied.

Nonetheless, I believe that the framework of normative standards has the resources to capture our intuition about the *Same-Person Case*. To see how, we must refine our understanding of normative standards. Up to this point, I have discussed normative standards as if passing and failing a normative standard were *binaries*. But, as a matter of fact, most normative standards are likely to be non-binary, in the sense that there are different *degrees* of success and failure in satisfying the standard.

To begin with an uncontroversial illustration, go back to my mountaineering case from Section 6. In this example, it is highly plausible that the satisfaction of the relevant prudential standard admits of degrees. Suppose I am contemplating climbing Mount Everest and have a choice between two oxygen masks: the kind of rudimentary oxygen mask available to Sir Edmund Hillary in 1953 or a state-of-the-art model. Suppose that both masks would *suffice* to minimally satisfy my need for oxygen. That is, in a scenario where *only* the rudimentary oxygen mask was available, I would not have a prudential reason *against* climbing Mount Everest. Nonetheless, given a choice between both oxygen masks, I clearly have prudential reason to choose the state-of-the-art model, since it will *better* satisfy my need for oxygen. (Of course, the basic insight of Section 6 remains unaffected by this: even the availability of a state-of-the-art oxygen mask does not give me, in itself, a reason to climb Mount Everest).

Now consider a more controversial case, that of promising: I can fully keep a promise, partially keep it to various degrees, or not keep it at all.

We may initially be attracted to a “rigorist” view about promising, which holds that while *failure* to comply with the promissory standard may come in degrees (it will often be morally more serious to make a promise and not keep it *at all* than to make a promise and *partially* keep it), *satisfaction* of the promissory standard does not. Only *fully* keeping a promise satisfies the promissory standard. It is prima facie wrong to make any promise that I foreseeably am unable to *fully* keep.

On reflection, however, such a view about promise-keeping may seem *too* rigorist. According to a more “permissive” view, the promissory standard can be both failed and *satisfied* to various degrees. That is, for many promises there will be some degree of promise-keeping  $D < 100\%$  at which the promissory standard counts as *satisfied*. In that case, there is no promissory reason, all else equal, against making a promise that I foreseeably am able to keep only to degree  $D$ . Consider a promise to pick you up at the station at noon. (Suppose I must communicate this promise by telegram, and cannot send a more specific message, such as “I might not be able to make it by noon exactly, but I promise to be there by five past.”). Clearly, there is some threshold of lateness such that, if I am late *beyond* that threshold, I do not count as having kept my promise to a degree that satisfies the promissory standard. (For example, if I don’t show up until 2.30pm, I’m *clearly* over the relevant threshold). If I know in advance that I unavoidably will be late beyond this threshold, I have a moral reason not to make the promise in the first place. (Of course, this reason could be outweighed by other considerations unrelated to the promissory standard). But, at the same time, we may hold that *some* delays are small enough that they do not prevent me from satisfying the promissory standard in this context – although I satisfy this standard to an even higher degree if I am *right* on time.

Whatever we may think of the somewhat controversial case of promise-keeping, it seems *highly* plausible that the moral standard governing procreation *can* be satisfied (and failed) to various degrees. Thus, in the Same-Person Case, while creating person B with a moderately happy life does satisfy the well-being standard (because B has a life that is worth living), making it the case that B enjoys a *very* happy life satisfies the well-being standard to a *higher* degree. Moreover, unlike in the case of promising, where there is such a thing as *fully* satisfying the promissory standard by keeping my promise 100%, the procreative standard is both upwardly and downwardly *unbounded*. For *any* life, however happy, we can imagine a yet happier life that would satisfy the procreative standard to a higher degree (and *mutatis mutandis* for miserable lives).

Suppose I have persuaded you that the satisfaction of normative standards often admits of degrees. I think it then highly plausible to embrace the following principle, which governs situations in which the *same* normative standard can be satisfied to a lesser or a greater degree:

*Principle of Greater Satisfaction:* In a choice between two outcomes in which the same normative standard is satisfied (or failed) to different degrees, I have reason to choose the outcome in which the standard is satisfied to a higher *rather than* to a lower degree. (“Sameness” of normative standard is here understood to be a function, not just of the *kind* of normative standard in question, but of the *identity* of the individual who grounds the standard).

Thus, in a choice between making you a promise and keeping it to degree  $D < 100\%$  and making you a promise and keeping it  $100\%$ , all else equal, I have promissory reason to bring about the latter rather than the former outcome, even if neither outcome would fail the promissory standard. Note, however, that the reason given to us by the Principle of Greater Satisfaction is merely *contrastive*<sup>43</sup>: Given the choice, I have moral reason to make the promise and fully keep it *rather than* to make the promise and only keep it to degree  $D$ . This does not imply that I also have an *unconditional* reason to make the promise and fully keep the promise. Given a choice between (making the promise and fully keeping the promise), and *not making* the promise, the Principle of Greater Satisfaction is silent.

Applied to the case of procreation, the Principle of Greater Satisfaction implies the

*Maximization Requirement:* In a choice between creating a new person with a life worth living at well-being level  $W$ , and creating the same person with a life worth living at well-being level  $V$ , where  $W > V$ , I have *contrastive* reason to

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<sup>43</sup> A contrastive reason, in general, is a reason to do  $p$  *rather than*  $q$ . According to Justin Snedegar (“Reason Claims and Contrastivism about Reasons”, *Philosophical Studies* 166:2 (2013), pp. 231-242) *all* reasons for action are to be understood as contrastive reasons, i.e. as reasons to do one thing *rather than* another. According to Snedegar, “reason” expresses a relation with an argument place for a set of alternatives. Whether or not Snedegar is right about this, the converse is surely not the case: a contrastive reason to do  $p$  *rather than*  $q$  need not also be a reason to do  $p$  *simpliciter*.

bring about the former rather than the latter outcome, if I am to create the person at all.

This explains our judgment in Same-Person Case. Note that the Maximization Requirement is compatible with the prioritarian intuition that the strength of the contrastive reason diminishes, the higher the levels of well-being  $W$  and  $V$  in question. Thus, my contrastive reason to make it the case that my offspring's life is *extremely* happy rather than *very* happy may be weaker than my contrastive reason to make it the case that her life is *very* happy rather than *moderately* happy. This can be true even if, in absolute terms, the differential in well-being is equally large. It would thus become easier for our reasons under the Maximization Requirement to be outweighed by other considerations, the better-off our offspring. And even when the balance of reasons still favors our reasons under the Maximization Requirement, failing to comply with these reasons would constitute a lesser moral wrong, the better off the recipient. All I am claiming, in putting forward the Maximization Requirement, is that, however well-off one's offspring, there is always some pro tanto reason to make them better off still, if this is possible.

## 9. Solving the Non-Identity Problem: The Selection Requirement

Let us pause and take stock: The Threshold Requirement by itself suffices to account for the Procreation Asymmetry. Moreover, I have just shown how a refined understanding of the moral standard governing procreation, as allowing for different *degrees* of satisfaction, supports the Maximization Requirement. This, in turn, captures our intuitions about the *Same-Person Case*.

However, in order to account for the intuitively correct verdict in Parfit's *Non-Identity Case*, we need a third principle. The challenge, recall, is to show how in a three-way choice between

*Nobody*: Create no new life

*Good*: Create person B, with a moderately happy life

*Great*: Create person C, with a very happy life

you have a strong moral reason not to choose Good over Great. The Selection Requirement and the Maximization Requirement, by themselves, cannot do this. If you choose Good, you satisfy both the Threshold and the Maximization Requirements with regard to person B. Despite his serious

congenital ailment, B has a life that is well worth living, and, by assumption, this is the best life that B could feasibly have. Moreover, since person C never exists, this outcome falls outside the scope of the procreation standard with regard to C.<sup>44</sup> Hence, an account that is limited to only these two principles cannot explain why you have strong moral reason not to choose Good rather than Great.

This should come as no surprise. After all, on their own, the Threshold and the Maximization Requirements are logically compatible with the narrow person-affecting principle, implied by moral actualism, which holds that it is a necessary condition on an action's being wrong that it is bad for, or worse for (or otherwise negatively affects) someone who ever lives. And, as Parfit already demonstrated in Chapter 16 of *Reasons and Persons*, it is notoriously problematic to try and account for the Non-Identity Intuition in narrow person-affecting terms.<sup>45</sup>

In order to account for the Non-Identity Intuition, we therefore must go beyond a narrow person-affecting view. However, the two most prominent alternatives to narrow person-affecting views in the literature, namely totalism and Parfit's wide person-affecting view commit us to rejecting the Procreation Asymmetry.

Fortunately, there is a third way. I shall now show how a natural extension of my standard-based approach to the ethics of procreation charts a middle course between Scylla and Charybdis.

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<sup>44</sup> Recall that, since I individuate moral standards by the identity of the individual who grounds the standard, the moral standard that must be satisfied if you create B is not the same moral standard that must be satisfied if you create C – though they are of the same *kind*.

<sup>45</sup> Here is a simple knock-down argument for this conclusion, which elsewhere I call "the Argument from the Two-Possible Case". Suppose that there *were* a person-affecting explanation for why it is wrong to choose Good rather than Great in Non-Identity Case. That is, suppose there were an explanation for the wrongness of this choice that invoked only facts about how *person B* was affected by it. It would then also have to be wrong to choose Good in the following *Two-Possible Case*, where you can only choose between

*Nobody*: Create no new life

and

*Good*: Create person B, with a moderately happy life.

For choosing Good in this Two-Possible Case affects person B in *just the same way* as does choosing Good in the Non-Identity Case. But, intuitively, there is *nothing* wrong with choosing Good in the Two-Possible Case. If your only options are to have a child with a congenital malady but whose life will be well worth living, and having no child at all, it does not seem morally wrong, all else equal, to have the child. For a fuller exposition of this argument, see my "Zukünftige Personen und Schuld ohne Opfer" (op. cit.).

I believe that proponents of the standard-based approach should accept the following third principle, in addition to the Threshold and Maximization Requirements:

*Selection Requirement:* In a choice between creating two possible persons, I have contrastive moral reason to create that person for whom I can *better* satisfy the moral standard that will obtain if I create that person.

The Selection Requirement renders the correct verdict about Non-Identity Case: Given a choice between Good and Great, you have contrastive reason to choose the latter rather than the former, since in Great you *better* satisfy the procreation standard with regard to C than you would satisfy the corresponding standard with regard to B in Good.

Moreover, the Selection Requirement is not ad hoc. Rather, it is implied by a highly plausible *general* principle for moral standards, namely the

*Principle of Standard Selection:* If I have a choice between bringing about Outcome 1 to which standard X applies, or bringing about Outcome 2 to which standard Y applies, and

- (i) standard X and standard Y are standards of the same kind,
- (ii) standard Y is satisfied to a higher degree in Outcome 2 than standard X is satisfied in Outcome 1, and
- (iii) all else is equal,

then I have contrastive reason to bring about Outcome 2 rather than Outcome 1.

This principle is intuitively compelling. If it matters that moral standards are satisfied better rather than worse, as the Principle of Greater Satisfaction asserts, and I am going to bring myself under either moral standard X or moral standard Y, which are standards of the same kind, then in choosing *which* of these moral standards to bring myself under, I surely have reason to choose the one that I will better satisfy.

Consider the following illustration: It is plausible that, conditional on employing a worker, I become subject to a new moral standard, namely to ensure that this worker is properly compensated. Suppose that I am trying to choose between employing a new worker in country X or country Y. The amount of money that I am able to pay in wages is the same in either

case, and the two countries are at purchasing power parity. However, due to a confiscatory income tax regime in country X, the worker in that country would receive only a small fraction of the wages I pay. As a result, the take-home pay for this worker, while not *unconscionably* low, would be quite miserly for the type of work in question. By contrast, the take-home pay for the worker in country Y would be very decent. Suppose that the two cases are alike in all other morally relevant respects.<sup>46</sup> The Principle of Standard Selection then implies that, if I am going to hire anyone, I have a pro tanto moral reason to hire the worker in country Y rather than country X, since I am *better* able to fulfil the moral standard that I bring myself under if I hire this worker than the one I bring myself under if I hire the other worker. If it matters that my workers are properly compensated, then, all else equal, I should hire the worker whom I can compensate more adequately. This is true even if I would not violate any moral standard by hiring the worker in country X.<sup>47</sup>

So far, we have seen that the Selection Requirement delivers the correct verdict about the Non-Identity Case and is backed up by a compelling general principle, the Principle of Standard Selection. Let us now see how the Selection Requirement meshes with the general approach to the ethics of procreation that I have defended in this paper.

As I argued in Section 5, there are no moral reasons to be exercised over the non-existence of a potential person whose life would have been well worth living, since there is no person *for whose sake* we have reason to be exercised. However, if we do decide to create a person, we have moral reason to be concerned that her life goes well.

Indeed, we should affirm a stronger claim: conditional on creating any new person, we have moral reason to want her life to go as well as possible in an *absolute* sense, unconstrained by questions of practical feasibility. Thus, if the new person's life, while still worth living, is only moderately happy because the person is burdened by some serious congenital ailment, there is reason to *regret* this, for that person's own

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<sup>46</sup> In particular, suppose the amount of *good* I do is the same in either case. Although only a small fraction of my wages reaches the worker in country X, the rest of this money is put to other uses, benefiting other people, with the effect being that the overall good achieved by hiring either worker is the same.

<sup>47</sup> The same story applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the case of promising. If I must choose between making a promise to person A which I know I will only be able to keep to degree  $D < 100\%$  and a promise to person B which I will be able to *fully* keep, and everything else is equal, I have reason to make the promise to person B. This is the case even if the degree to which I can keep my promise to person A is sufficiently high that I wouldn't *fail* the promissory standard.

sake. This is true, even if, as a matter of practical feasibility, this person's life goes as well as it could.

It follows that, by creating the very happy child in Non-Identity Case, you ensure that the world as it is comes *closer* to the world as you have reason to want it to be, conditional on having a child, than would be the case if you create the less happy child. This, surely, gives you a reason to choose Great over Good. It is precisely because, for each person, conditional on her existence, we have bearer-dependent reasons to want her life to go as well as possible in an absolute sense, that in deciding *whom* to create, we should aim to select that person whose life we expect to go absolutely best. This explains our intuition in the Non-Identity Case.

Unlike totalism or the wide person-affecting view, the Selection Requirement has the virtue of capturing the Non-Identity Intuition without having to postulate an *unconditional* reason to create person C, with his very happy life. My moral reason for choosing Great over Good is *merely* contrastive: *if* I am going to create any person, I have reason to choose Great *rather than* Good. The Selection Requirement is therefore entirely compatible with the claim that in a three-way choice between Nobody, Good, and Great, I have *no* moral reason to choose Great, or Good, over Nobody. As the bearer-dependent view of beneficence maintains, there is no unconditional moral reason to confer benefits on people by creating them.

If we wanted to give a "Parfitian" label to the view that emerges from combining the Threshold, the Maximization, and the Selection Requirements, we could call this a *conditional wide-person-affecting view*. Parfit's wide person-affecting view gives a more plausible explanation than totalism for why, in a choice between Good and Great, you ought to pick Great. The wide person-affecting view tells you to pick Great because that way *people are benefited more* – not because this brings about a state of affairs in which the value of wellbeing is more fully promoted. The problem with the wide person-affecting view is that it postulates an *unconditional* moral reason to confer benefits on people, including by bringing them into existence. The same reasoning that advocates not choosing Good over Great also militates in favor of choosing Great in a three-way choice between Great, Good, and Nobody. And this, of course, amounts to denying the Asymmetry.

The conditional wide-person-affecting view avoids this implication. According to this view, *if* you are going to pick either Good or Great, you ought to pick Great, because this benefits people more. You thereby achieve more of what you have reason to want for person C's sake, conditional on her existence, than what you would have reason to want

for person B's sake, conditional on his existence. But, at the same time, there is no moral reason to create a new "sake" for which we have reason to do things. In a three-way choice between Great, Good, and Nobody, there is nothing wrong with choosing Nobody. My view thus allows me to give the correct answer in Non-Identity Case while simultaneously upholding the Procreation Asymmetry.

## 10. Conclusion

In this paper, I set out to reconcile our intuitions about two of the most recalcitrant problem cases in population ethics, the Procreation Asymmetry and the Non-Identity Problem. I showed that what has prevented philosophers from developing a theory that gives a satisfactory account of *both* these problems is their tacit commitment to a teleological conception of well-being, as something to be 'promoted'. Replacing this picture with one according to which our reasons to confer well-being on people are bearer-dependent, and thus conditional on their existence, allowed me to give a defense of the Procreation Asymmetry that strikes me as both theoretically neat and inherently plausible. At the same time, I showed how the underlying theory of the reason-giving force of wellbeing has the resources to underwrite the intuitively correct verdict about the Non-Identity Problem.

I said at the outset that the aim of this paper was not to provide a knock-down argument against opponents of the Procreation Asymmetry. Rather, I set myself the more modest aim of showing how this attractive intuition *could possibly be true*, given the difficulty of providing an account of the intuition that did not face fatal problems – above all, forcing us to deny the Non-Identity Intuition. However, having explained how we can uphold the Procreation Asymmetry without giving up on the Non-Identity Intuition, it is now perhaps time to ask: If you can have your cake and eat it too, why not do both?

## Appendix A: Roberts's Variabilism

According to Melinda Roberts's view, which she dubs *variabilism*, "all persons matter morally but they all matter *variably*."<sup>48</sup> Instead of dividing *people* up in accordance with whether they matter morally or not, Roberts proposes that we instead divide up *losses* and *gains* to people in accordance with whether *they* matter morally or not. As Roberts employs the term, a person incurs a 'loss' whenever agents could have created more well-being for that person and instead create less. More precisely, "to say that a person *p* incurs a *loss* at a given world *w* as a result of a given act *a* is to say that there was still another world *w'* accessible to agents at the critical time such that their performance of an alternate act *a'* at *w'* is better for *p* than their performance of *a* at *w* is."<sup>49</sup> Unlike me, Roberts rejects the claim that a possible world *w* can only be *better* (worse) for a person than a world *z* if the person is actual at both world *w* and world *z*. She thus maintains that it is *better for* a person to be created with a life worth living than not to be created, even though the person exists in only one of these two possible worlds. Indeed, Roberts goes further than this, holding that a potential person need not even exist at some world *w* in order to count as incurring a loss (or receiving a gain) at that world *w*. Roberts can thus maintain that failing to bring into existence a potential person whose life would have been well worth living is a loss to this potential person, while averting the creation of a miserable life is a gain for the potential person, who is thus prevented from coming into existence.

The central idea of the variabilist approach, however, is that not all losses matter morally. Rather, variabilism asserts that the moral significance of any loss depends on where that loss is incurred in relation to the person who incurs it. That is: "the loss incurred at a world where the person who incurs that loss does or will exist has *full moral significance*, while a loss incurred by that same person at a world where that person never exists at all has *no moral significance whatsoever*."<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, according to Roberts, *gains* matter just in case they avoid a morally significant loss.

Roberts's variabilism succeeds at capturing both halves of the Asymmetry. It matters morally that we do not create a miserable life, since doing so would impose a morally significant loss on a person. (The loss is morally significant because the subject of the loss exists at the world at

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<sup>48</sup> Melinda Roberts, "The Asymmetry: A Solution," *Theoria* 77 (2011), p. 335.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 337.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 356.

which she incurs the loss, namely the world at which she exists with a miserable life). By contrast, the loss we cause by failing to create a happy life is of no moral significance, according to variabilism: Though it represents a loss to a potential person, this person does not, and never will, exist at the world at which the loss is incurred.

Besides our disagreement about the logic of the *better/worse for*-relation, which I set aside in the following, I have two principal objections to Roberts's variabilist proposal. First, while Roberts's variabilism captures the two halves of the Asymmetry, it does so in a manner that will strike supporters of a symmetry view as objectionably *ad hoc*. The variabilist claims that while all losses matter morally provided they are incurred by people at worlds where these people exist, the same is *not* the case for gains. Rather, "gains have moral significance, not when those gains are accrued at the world at which the person who accrues those gains *exists*, but [only] when the *losses* those gains *avoid* on behalf of that person are incurred at worlds where *the person who incurs those losses exists*."<sup>51</sup> It is this purported difference between the moral significance of gains and losses that allows variabilism to track the intuitive moral asymmetry between creating a miserable life and failing to create a happy life.

However, lest she beg the question against a proponent of the symmetry view, the variabilist owes us an *explanation* and *justification* for this purported difference between losses and gains. If we think that avoiding losses for existing people always matters morally, then what is our reason for thinking that conferring gains on existing people does *not* always matter?

Unfortunately, Roberts has little to offer on this score, beyond the fact that positing such a difference allows her to capture the Asymmetry in a way that avoids inconsistency. She writes:

Why not make gains matter at worlds where the person who accrues those gains exists? The simple answer is that our aim has been to determine whether we can situate the two halves of the Asymmetry in a principle that we are not then compelled on consistency or other conceptual grounds to reject. To do things the other way around – to make gains matter at worlds where the person who accrues those gains exists – goes no distance at all in achieving that aim. It is rather a way of failing to account for the Asymmetry.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 365.

This passage essentially concedes that variabilism has no support beyond the fact that it captures the Asymmetry. For those puzzled by how the Asymmetry itself could be true, given the Objection from Symmetry, it offers no deeper explanation; nor does it help to fortify the Asymmetry against its critics. Variabilism is thus of limited explanatory and dialectical power.

My second objection is that – like the presentist, necessitarian, and actualist proposals surveyed above – variabilism cannot account for most people’s intuition in *Non-Identity Case*, namely that it matters morally that the woman create person C, whose life will be very happy, rather than person B, whose life, while still well worth living, will go considerably less well. If variabilism is right, this intuition cannot be correct.

According to Roberts, gains to existing people matter only insofar as they prevent a loss to someone who would have existed at the world in which the loss occurs. But this isn’t the case for the people in the non-identity case. They exist *only* in the world in which they gain by being created; in the world at which they lose by not being created, they do not exist. Therefore, the fact that person C would gain more, if he is created, than person B, if he is created, is without moral significance, according to variabilism. For neither gain prevents a morally significant loss. Therefore, variabilism lacks the resources to account for the non-identity intuition.

Roberts herself does not consider this as a problem, since, surprisingly, she appears not to share the non-identity intuition:

We can discern no (...) morally significant loss [in such cases]. On the other hand, neither do we clearly in such cases discern wrongdoing. (When it is maximizing for everyone else, is it really wrong to bring a genetically impaired but happy child into existence rather than a less impaired and happier child into existence?)<sup>53</sup>

For those of use who do have the intuition, and who would consider jettisoning it in order to account for the Asymmetry too high a price to pay, variabilism is not the way forward.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 362.