

Chapter 3

Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist

Jeff McMahan

Abstract This paper questions the justification for the common view that there is a moral reason not to cause a person to exist if his life would be miserable, but no reason to cause a person to exist because his life would be worth living. It argues that this asymmetry presupposes an ad hoc claim about the different ways in which good and bad states in an individual's life have value. The claim that there is a moral difference between harming and benefiting is more plausible but supports only a weaker asymmetry that concedes that there is a moral reason to create lives worth living.

Keywords Procreation · Asymmetry · Nonexistence · Harming · Benefiting · Life worth living.

3.1 Introduction

Most of us accept the following two propositions.

- (1) That a person would have a life that is “worth not living”—a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good—provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing.
- (2) That a person would have a life worth living does not, on its own, provide a moral reason to cause that person to exist, though there is no general moral reason *not* to cause such a person to exist.

In 1981, in my first published paper, I referred to this pair of propositions as the *Asymmetry*.¹ My claim then was that although the Asymmetry is intuitively compelling, it is extraordinarily difficult to defend or justify. That will be my contention again now, 27 years later. I suppose it is some consolation that this conclusion will be bracing for those who are fond of claiming that there is no progress in philosophy.

J. McMahan (✉)
Philosophy, Rutgers University, New Jersey, USA
e-mail: McMahan@Philosophy.Rutgers.edu

3.2 Definitions and Distinctions

For brevity of exposition, I will use some rather silly shorthand terms, such as “happy people” and “miserable people.” By “happy people” I will mean people whose lives are worth living, in the sense that the good elements in their lives objectively outweigh the bad. “Miserable people” are those in whose lives the bad elements outweigh the good. I will not discuss, and will leave unlabeled, those in whose lives the good elements are neither greater nor less than the bad.

I will refer to intrinsically good states within a life simply as “goods” and to intrinsically bad states as “bads,” despite the unidiomatic use of “bad” as a noun. A good and a bad are “equivalent” when they are roughly equal in magnitude on either side of the zero point. A good and a bad are *subjectively* equivalent if the potential subject is indifferent between having both and having neither. This is, in my view, a mistaken measure of equivalence, but I mention it just to clarify the notion of equivalence.

It will be important throughout the subsequent discussion to distinguish among three types of value, or ways in which things may be valuable. When something is *better for* an individual, it has *individual-affecting value*; when something is *worse for* an individual, it has negative individual-affecting value.² Note that individual-affecting value is defined comparatively: if having a certain good is better for an individual, its absence would have been worse for that individual.

There are, however, some things that are good or bad *for* an individual in an essentially noncomparative way. For example, to be caused to exist with a life worth living seems to be good for the individual to whom it happens. There is no problem in identifying the subject of this good. Yet the alternative in which that individual would not have had that good—that is, the alternative in which she never exists—would not have been bad or worse *for her*, since nothing can be good or bad for someone who never exists. Similarly, to be caused to exist with a life that is not worth living is *bad* for the individual who comes to exist but not *worse* for her.

Some people might wish to regard continuing to exist as a noncomparative good or bad in the same way that coming into existence is. Epicureans, for example, hold that ceasing to exist can be neither better nor worse for an individual, nor even good or bad for that individual, since they claim that there is no one for whom death, which involves ceasing to exist, could be good or bad, or better or worse. They could, however, still accept that *continuing to exist* could be good or bad for an individual in an essentially noncomparative way—that is, it could be good to continue to exist if life would be worth living, even if ceasing to exist would be neither bad nor worse than continuing to exist.³

I will refer to the sort of value that may be realized by an individual’s coming into existence as *noncomparative individual-affecting value*, or *noncomparative value* for short. I will reserve the term “individual-affecting value” for things that are better or worse for individuals, on the assumption that existing cannot be better or worse than never existing, and leaving open the question whether continuing to exist can be better or worse than ceasing to exist.

The third category of value is *impersonal value*. Value is impersonal when it is neither good or bad nor better or worse *for* anyone. All impersonal value

is comparative. If something is impersonally good, considered on its own, its absence would be impersonally worse, other things being equal. If it is impersonally good, *all things considered*, its absence would be impersonally worse *simpliciter*.

The category of impersonal value is heterogeneous. For all or at least most individual-affecting values, there are corresponding impersonal values. An individual's suffering is, in itself and apart from its effects, bad in individual-affecting terms. But it is also impersonally bad. Its presence makes the world worse. That individual-affecting and impersonal values overlap in this way makes it particularly difficult to understand how the two types of value can be combined, aggregated, or weighed against one another.⁴

Some impersonal values, however, have no connection to individual well-being. Species diversity, for example, might have value even if it were not instrumentally valuable for the individual members of any species. Other impersonal values make essential reference to individual well-being and yet are distinct from, need not coincide with, and can indeed potentially conflict with individual-affecting value. Deserved harm is one example. While deserved good is both good for the deserving person and good impersonally, deserved harm is good impersonally but bad, or worse, for the person harmed. *Equality* of well-being is another example. For those who accept that equality of well-being is a genuine value that is distinct from the prioritarian view that the value of making an individual better off by some fixed amount is greater the worse off that individual is, there is value in *reducing* the well-being of the best off even if this does nothing to raise the well-being of anyone else. For the increase in equality of well-being has impersonal value even if in individual-affecting terms the effects are wholly bad (so that the individual-affecting bad effects may outweigh the impersonal good effect).⁵

Impersonal value may also make essential reference to well-being and yet not correspond to any individual-affecting value. Because impersonal value is comparative, it is impersonally better, other things being equal, if an individual whose life would not be worth living never exists than if she does exist. Similarly, it is impersonally worse if an individual whose life would be worth living never exists than if she does exist. In such cases, there may be no one for whom an individual's never existing is better or worse, or even noncomparatively good or bad.

Although I have distinguished three kinds of value—individual-affecting value, noncomparative value, and impersonal value—these kinds of value give rise to only two kinds of moral reason: individual-affecting and impersonal. One has both an individual-affecting and an impersonal reason not to cause an existing individual to suffer. One's reason to preserve or promote the diversity of species may, however, be impersonal only, and the same may be true of one's reason to increase equality of well-being (for example, when the worse off would gain less than the better off would lose) or one's reason not to cause a miserable person to exist—though of course in all these cases one's impersonal reason may be reinforced by a distinct individual-affecting reason: to preserve the lives of the existing members of a species, to raise the well-being of the worst off, and to spare existing people the burden of caring for a miserable person. Yet the individual-affecting reason and the impersonal reason are never the *same* reason.

There is, admittedly, some controversy about whether choices between causing and not causing a person to exist are governed by individual-affecting or impersonal reasons. No one, of course, doubts that individual-affecting reasons can be relevant insofar as causing a person to exist can affect the well-being of others. But are there individual-affecting reasons deriving from a concern for the well-being of the person who might be caused to exist? Suppose that because one has a certain genetic abnormality, any child one might have would be miserable—that is, would have a life in which the bads would outweigh the goods. Most of us agree that there is a strong moral reason not to cause such an individual to exist. Some philosophers think this is an individual-affecting reason, one that does *not* derive from the effects the act would have on preexisting people. But this is a mistake. It is true, of course, that *if* one does cause such an individual to exist, there will then be someone for whom one's act was *bad*, though not *worse*. Yet at the time of one's choosing between acting and not acting, there is no one whose interests would be affected by one's choice. If one were to act on the reason not to cause an individual to exist, there would never be anyone for whom that would be better. And if one were to act *against* that reason, there would never be anyone for whom one's act was worse. The fact that acting against the reason would be bad in noncomparative individual-affecting terms seems insufficient to ground an individual-affecting reason not to cause a miserable person to exist.

Although it may seem obvious that one's reason *not* to cause an individual to exist must be impersonal, since if one acts on that reason there will never be anyone for whom that would be better or worse, or even good or bad, it may nevertheless seem that one's reason to *cause* a person to exist, *if* one were to have such a reason, could be individual-affecting, since acting on that reason would be *good* for the person who would then exist, and would produce noncomparative individual-affecting value. But it seems best to classify one's reason as impersonal in this case as well. At the time of one's choice, there is no one who exists or will exist independently of that choice for whose sake one could be acting in causing him or her to exist. If one chooses to cause an individual to exist, that may be good for the individual who comes to exist, but it cannot be one's reason for acting, or one's intention in acting, to bestow that good on that individual. At most one's reason might be to create additional noncomparative individual-affecting value, which would then necessarily attach to and be good for someone. But the creation of this good would not be *better* for that individual, nor would its not being created have been worse for him or her. It seems, therefore, that any moral reason to cause or not to cause an individual to exist that derives from a concern for what that individual's well-being is best considered an impersonal rather than an individual-affecting reason.

3.3 Reasons and Values Presupposed by the Asymmetry

Having drawn certain distinctions, we can now consider what assumptions about values and reasons are necessary for the Asymmetry to be true. The first of the two propositions constitutive of the Asymmetry seems to presuppose that it is worse to

01 cause bads to exist by causing people to exist. Since causing bads in this way is not
 02 worse *for* any individual, it can be worse only impersonally, and the reason not to
 03 do what is worse only impersonally must itself be an impersonal reason.

04 The second proposition, however, seems to presuppose either that it is not better
 05 to cause goods by causing people to exist or that, even if it is better, there is no
 06 reason to do what is better in this way. It denies, in other words, either that there
 07 is impersonal value in causing goods by causing people to exist or that there is an
 08 impersonal reason to create goods that are better only impersonally.

09 Actually, though, what is presupposed by the two propositions that are constitu-
 10 tive of the Asymmetry is more complex than this. If it were worse to cause bads by
 11 causing a person to exist but not good or better in any way to cause goods in this way,
 12 it seems that there would be a reason not to cause bads by causing a person to exist
 13 but nothing other than extrinsic considerations to oppose this reason. Consideration
 14 of the effect on people of being caused to exist would ground a general reason not
 15 to cause people to exist, establishing a presumption against having children, even
 16 when a child would have a life that would be well worth living. That reason might
 17 be contingently offset in many cases by individual-affecting reasons deriving from
 18 the interests of preexisting people, making it permissible to cause a person to exist
 19 in these cases. One could justify having a child only by showing that the impersonal
 20 reason not to cause the many bads that the child's life would inevitably contain
 21 would be outweighed by the good effects that the child's existence would have on
 22 the lives of others. Procreation would be a *prima facie* objectionable, essentially
 23 selfish activity.

24 This is not only highly implausible but is also incompatible with the second
 25 proposition of the Asymmetry, which asserts, in effect, that there is no general
 26 reason not to cause people to exist if their lives would be worth living. So the
 27 foregoing understanding of the values and reasons that underlie the Asymmetry
 28 cannot be right. What is missing is a further distinction. It seems that the Asymmetry
 29 presupposes that goods created by causing a person to exist count in one way but
 30 not another. They do not count as reasons for causing the person to exist. But they
 31 do weigh against and cancel out corresponding bads that the person's life would
 32 contain. I will refer to these two ways in which the goods that a person's life would
 33 contain might contribute to the justification for causing that person to exist as the
 34 *reason-giving function* and the *canceling function*. What the Asymmetry presup-
 35 poses is that while goods have a canceling function in procreative choices, they have
 36 no reason-giving function. They have a kind of impersonal value in that they weigh
 37 against and cancel out corresponding bads, but they do not otherwise count in favor
 38 of causing a person to exist, no matter how greatly they may outweigh the bads.⁶

39 Common sense intuitions seem to presuppose all of the following. Individual-
 40 affecting goods and bads have both reason-giving and canceling functions. There
 41 are reasons to do what is better for people and reasons not to do what is worse for
 42 people, and at least in many cases, the good effects of an act on a person weigh
 43 against and can cancel out equivalent bad effects in the determination of the act's
 44 permissibility. In procreative choices, bads have both impersonal reason-giving and
 45 canceling functions, but goods have only an impersonal canceling function. It is

worse in impersonal terms to create bads by causing people to exist, but the negative impersonal value of these bads can be counterbalanced and canceled by the creation of equivalent goods within the life of the same person. While goods thus have impersonal value in that they weigh against bads, they do not have impersonal reason-giving value. The goods that an individual's life would contain if he or she were caused to exist can contribute to the permissibility of causing that individual to exist by weighing against and canceling out the bads that the life would contain, but they provide no positive reason for causing the individual to exist.

These seem to be the assumptions about values and reasons that underlie the Asymmetry, but they seem strikingly ad hoc. Why should goods have both reason-giving and canceling functions in individual-affecting choices but only a canceling function in procreative choices? Why should goods have one kind of impersonal value—canceling value—but not the other—reason-giving value?

My impression is that no one has tried to answer these questions, in part because no one has asked them. But having asked them, I confess that, at the moment at least, I do not know how to answer them. In the absence of a satisfactory answer to these questions, it is tempting to look for the justification for the Asymmetry in more familiar asymmetries in common sense morality.

3.4 The Distinction Between Harming and Benefiting

One such asymmetry is that between harming and benefiting. According to this view, the reason not to cause harm is stronger than the reason to confer an equivalent benefit, if other things are equal; therefore, to harm an individual is worse, or more seriously morally objectionable, than not to benefit that individual to an equivalent degree. If causing a miserable person to exist is an instance of harming, or doing harm, while not causing a happy person to exist is an instance of not benefiting, then the Asymmetry may be just a manifestation in the area of procreation of the familiar moral difference between harming and not benefiting.

This claim is, however, more problematic than it may seem. For our ordinary concepts of harming and benefiting seem to be comparative and thus to have no application to acts of procreation. Both harming and benefiting, as ordinarily understood, involve affecting whether an individual's well-being improves or declines, or does not improve or does not decline, relative to some baseline. The usual baseline is either temporal (what an individual's well-being was *before* it was affected by an act) or counterfactual (what an individual's well-being would have been had it not been affected by that act). Because improvement and decline relative to some baseline of well-being are essentially comparative notions, harming and benefiting seem to be comparative notions as well.

Understood in this way, harming, which is an instance of *doing*, involves causing an individual's well-being to decline or preventing it from improving, while benefiting involves causing an individual's well-being to improve or preventing it from declining. Not harming is not causing a decline or preventing an improvement,

01 while not benefiting is not causing an improvement or not preventing a decline.
02 The distinction between harming and not benefiting is therefore compounded from
03 two further distinctions of presumed moral significance: that between doing and not
04 doing, and that between a decline in well-being and an improvement in well-being.

05 There is another dimension to the distinction between harming and benefiting
06 that is worth noting, which is that it may also be sensitive to where, in relation to
07 the zero-point on the scale that measures well-being, an individual's well-being is
08 before an act is done, where it is after an act is done, or where it would be had the act
09 not been done. Thus, preventing an improvement in the well-being of an individual
10 whose level of well-being is already extremely high may not count as harming.
11 Similarly, causing an improvement in the well-being of an individual whose level
12 of well-being is below the zero-point—that is, whose life is miserable or not worth
13 living, counts not only as benefiting but as mitigating or reducing a harm.

14 Obviously, however, when one causes an individual to exist, comparisons cannot
15 be made between that individual's well-being once she exists and her level prior to
16 the act that caused her to exist, or the level of well-being she would have had if the
17 act of causing her to exist had not been done. One possibility for bringing acts of
18 procreation within the scope of the concepts of harming and benefiting is, as some
19 philosophers have done, to assign prenatal nonexistence a value of zero, effectively
20 locating it at the zero-point on the scale that measures well-being, both positive and
21 negative. One could then take the zero-point as the relevant baseline, claiming that
22 causing an individual to exist harms her to the extent that her life falls below the
23 zero-point, or benefits her to the extent that it is above the zero-point. This would,
24 of course, require a determination of whether the object of evaluation would be her
25 entire life, so that one would be unable to tell whether and to what extent she had
26 been benefited or harmed until after she had died, or whether the evaluation would
27 consider only those aspects of her life properly attributable only to her being caused
28 to exist. But the same problem besets any minimally sophisticated account of how
29 causing an individual to exist can harm or benefit that individual.

30 There is, however, no need to adopt this strained proposal, which treats prenatal
31 nonexistence as the evaluative equivalent of a state of existence in which the intrinsic
32 goods neither outweigh nor are outweighed by the intrinsic bads. For there is a
33 better way of extending or expanding the notions of harming and benefiting to apply
34 to acts of procreation. This is to claim, plausibly, that the notions of harming and
35 benefiting have a noncomparative dimension as well as the familiar, and dominant,
36 comparative dimension. It seems intelligible to say that to cause a miserable person
37 to exist is to harm that person. All that need be meant by this is that the person is
38 harmed by being caused to be in a state that is on the whole intrinsically bad for her,
39 because the bads of her life outweigh the goods. Similarly, even if one agrees with
40 the Epicureans that death cannot be bad for a person, one can still coherently claim
41 that to save a person's life is to benefit her, if it causes her to be in a state that is
42 intrinsically good for her.

43 Accepting that our ordinary concepts of harming and benefiting contain an
44 implicit noncomparative dimension in addition to a comparative dimension seems
45 preferable to claiming, as some philosophers have done, that the concepts are best

analyzed in wholly noncomparative terms. For accounts of this latter sort have the counterintuitive implication that to kill a person, or at least to kill a person painlessly, is not to harm her. (The familiar comparative account has this same implication as well *if* it is combined with the Epicurean claim that ceasing to exist cannot be bad or worse for a person.)

Suppose that we have now identified an unproblematic sense in which to cause a person to exist can be to harm or benefit that person. This allows for the coherence of the claim that the Asymmetry is just an implication of the familiar view that harming is more seriously objectionable than not benefiting. For to cause a miserable person to exist is to harm her noncomparatively, by causing her to be in a state that is intrinsically bad for her, while not causing a happy person to exist is a peculiar way of failing to bestow a peculiar benefit on the person who would otherwise have existed.

One might object to this explanation of the moral basis of the Asymmetry on the ground that, while to cause a miserable person to exist is a clear instance of noncomparative harming, not to cause a happy person to exist is *not* an instance of not benefiting, for in the latter case there is no one who is not benefited, no one of whom it is true that she could have been benefited but was not.

The problem with this objection, however, is that there is a parallel claim about not harming that seems to undermine the claim that the moral reason not to cause a miserable person to exist is that to do so would be to harm her. Let us assume that it is unproblematic to say that to cause a miserable person to exist is an instance of harming, for there is no problem in identifying the victim of the harm. The objection is instead to the claim that not to cause a happy person to exist is an instance of *not benefiting*. For in this case there is no one who is not benefited. Yet to the extent that these claims are plausible, it must be equally plausible that to cause a happy person to exist is to benefit her, while not to cause a miserable person to exist is *not* an instance if *not harming*, for there is not one who is not harmed. But the last of these propositions seems to undermine the view that the reason one has not to cause a miserable person to exist is that to cause him to exist would be to harm him. For this presupposes that the reason not to cause a miserable person to exist is an instance of the more general reason *not to cause harm*; yet in this case not to cause the miserable person to exist would *not* be an instance of not causing harm, for there would be no one who was not harmed. In short, the claim that not causing a happy person to exist cannot be an instance of not benefiting implies that not causing a miserable person to exist also cannot be an instance of not harming. And this undermines the claim that the reason not to cause a miserable person to exist is that to cause him to exist would be to harm him and there is a moral reason not to harm him.

Let us grant, then, that not to cause a miserable person to exist is indeed an instance of not harming. We should then also accept that not to cause a happy person to exist is an instance of not benefiting. The suggestion is that, on these assumptions, the Asymmetry can be explained and defended by reference to the more general asymmetry between harming and benefiting, and in particular the general claim that harming is worse than not benefiting. But while the asymmetry between harming and benefiting provides some support for the Asymmetry, the support falls well short

of entailment. For the Asymmetry holds that there is *no* moral reason to bestow a benefit by causing an individual to exist. But the common sense asymmetry between harming and benefiting does not deny that there is a general moral reason to benefit people; it merely denies that the reason to benefit people is *as strong* as the reason not to harm people to an equivalent degree. So what the general asymmetry between harming and benefiting entails, on the assumption that causing an individual to exist can be an instance of noncomparative harming or benefiting, is not the Asymmetry but what I will call the *Weak Asymmetry*.

According to the Weak Asymmetry, the reason not to cause harm by causing a miserable person to exist is stronger, perhaps considerably stronger, than the reason to bestow an equivalent benefit by causing a happy person to exist, so that it is more seriously morally objectionable to cause harm by causing a miserable person to exist than it is not to bestow a benefit by failing to cause a happy person to exist. The Weak Asymmetry, in other words, discounts the reason-giving weight that potential goods have in procreative choices, though not all the way to zero. If the Weak Asymmetry is simply an implication of the general common sense asymmetry between harming and benefiting, the degree to which the reason-giving weight of the goods in a possible person's possible life is discounted should be the same as the degree to which benefits are discounted relative to harms in ordinary individual-affecting choices.

Ought the canceling weight of potential goods to be discounted in procreative choices as well? That is, does a good that an individual's life would contain if she were caused to exist cancel out an *equivalent* bad that the life would also contain, or does it cancel only a lesser bad? If the former—that is, if the canceling weight of goods is not discounted—it can be permissible to cause an individual to exist whose life would be just barely worth living, even if this person's existence would have no positive effect on the lives of others. If, by contrast, the canceling weight of goods is discounted along with the reason-giving weight, the goods that an individual's life would contain must exceed the bads by a certain margin for it to be permissible to cause that individual to exist. The extent to which the goods must exceed the bads is determined by the degree to which the canceling weight is discounted. There are some people whose views about causing individuals to exist may find support in the view that in procreative choices the canceling weight of potential goods is discounted along with the reason-giving weight. Frances Kamm, for example, has suggested that “we should not create persons at will unless we have good reason to believe that they can have some. . . number of years of life with some degree of health and welfare.”⁷ And David Benatar claims that “for a life to be not worth continuing, it must be worse than it need be for it not to be worth starting,” which seems to presuppose that while potential goods can cancel equivalent bads in individual-affecting choices, their canceling weight is diminished in procreative choices.⁸

Again, if the Weak Asymmetry derives from the general common sense asymmetry between harming and benefiting, we could determine whether the canceling weight of potential goods in procreative choices is discounted by seeing whether it is discounted in individual-affecting choices. And it seems that it is—at least in

many cases, though there seems to be some variation with an agent's intentions. Suppose that one could confer a benefit on a person but only by intentionally causing him to suffer an equivalent harm. And suppose that the benefit and the harm are not only objectively equivalent but subjectively equivalent as well, in that if this were a prudential choice the person himself would be indifferent between having the benefit together with the harm and having neither. Most people believe that it would nevertheless be wrong to cause the harm as a means of conferring the benefit, in the absence of the person's consent. If that is right, the good does not cancel the harm and thus its canceling weight seems to be discounted. Yet it is at least arguable that it would be permissible to bestow the benefit intentionally, foreseeing that the equivalent harm would also occur, or to cause both the benefit and the harm as side effects of action intended to produce a benefit for a different person.

It seems, therefore, that there is a presumption in procreation cases that the canceling weight of goods that a possible person's life would contain is discounted, though perhaps not to the same degree that the reason-giving weight is, according to the Weak Asymmetry. For even though the canceling weight of goods in individual-affecting choices seems to be discounted in most or all cases, there is no reason to suppose that the degree of the discounting must be the same as the degree to which the reason-giving weight of those goods is discounted relative to reason-giving weight of equivalent harms.

If the canceling weight of potential goods is discounted in procreative choices, this should be reflected in the Asymmetry as well as in the Weak Asymmetry. The Asymmetry, which I take to be the common sense view, should be revised so that it claims that in procreative choices, while the potential goods that an individual's life would contain have no reason-giving weight, they do have canceling weight, though that weight is discounted; therefore, while it is *in general* permissible to cause happy people to exist, there is a threshold on the scale that measures well-being such that if an individual's life would fall below that threshold, it is wrong to cause him to exist, even though his life would be worth living and his existence would have no effects on others.

3.5 The Individual-Affecting Symmetry View

Thus far we have considered two views of the morality of procreation: the Asymmetry and the Weak Asymmetry. I suggested that the fundamental presupposition of the Asymmetry is that, while in individual-affecting choices goods or benefits have both reason-giving weight and canceling weight, in procreative choices they have no reason-giving weight, yet retain the same canceling weight they have in individual-affecting choices. This is peculiar and requires both explanation and defense; yet to my knowledge it has never received either. An appeal to the common sense moral asymmetry between harming and benefiting leads not to the Asymmetry but only to the Weak Asymmetry, to which we will return.

At this point we should consider the alternative symmetrical views of the morality of procreation. This will help us to appreciate both the importance of being able

to defend an asymmetrical view of the morality of procreation and the problems facing any version of the Weak Asymmetry that diverges significantly from the Asymmetry.

Some philosophers have resisted the idea that there can be impersonal values, or indeed even noncomparative individual-affecting values. The only values, on their view, are individual-affecting values, and the only reasons for action are individual-affecting reasons.⁹ According to this view, an act can be wrong only if there is some individual who exists at some time for whom the act is worse—though note that this allows that an act can be worse for an individual simply by excluding an alternative act that would have benefited that individual. Because there is no one for whom never existing can be worse (or even bad), it cannot be wrong to fail to cause a happy person to exist, unless there is an individual who already exists, or who will exist independently of the choice of whether to cause a new person to exist, for whom the choice not to cause a new person to exist would be worse. This individual-affecting view thus implies the second of the two views that together constitute the Asymmetry.

But it cannot imply, and is not even compatible with, the first of these two claims. One can have an individual-affecting reason to do or not to do a certain act only if the act would be better or worse for some individual. But to cause a miserable person to exist cannot be worse for that person, since “worse for” implies a comparison with an alternative that would be better for the same individual. But the relevant alternative to causing a miserable person to exist is simply not to cause that person to exist, in which case there is never anyone for whom that alternative is better. Since there can be no one for whom never existing is better, being caused to exist cannot be worse in individual-affecting terms.

I do not claim that the *only* alternative to causing a miserable person to exist is not to cause him to exist. It is possible to individuate and refer to a particular possible person—for example, by reference to a particular gamete pair. And it is also possible that the same possible person could be caused to exist not as a miserable person but in different conditions as a happy person. But in actual cases we do not know how to do this or even how to determine whether it has happened.

Nor do I claim that for an outcome to be better or worse for an individual, there must be an alternative in which that same individual would exist in a worse or better state. I accept, for example, that it can be worse for an individual to die, even though to be dead is not to be in a worse state. But in this case there is someone for whom continued life would be good but for whom death would involve nothing at all. Because something good is better than nothing *for this person*, it coherent to claim that continuing to live would be better for him and that death would be worse, even though death would involve his no longer existing. But what is true of ceasing to exist is not true of never existing. Even if we could individuate and refer to a possible person who would have a life worth not living if he were to exist, there will never be anyone for whom never existing is better than being caused to exist as a miserable person *if* in fact we do not cause him to exist.

The claim that ceasing to exist can be worse for an individual while never existing cannot be seems to imply that there is a significant difference between an

individual's never existing and an individual's beginning to exist and then immediately ceasing to exist. In the former case, there is no one for whom nonexistence is worse, while in the latter case there is. Yet intuitively there seems to be little or no difference between these cases.

This is a serious objection to my claim only if my claim implies that an individual's ceasing to exist immediately after beginning to exist is *significantly* worse for that individual than continuing to exist would have been. My claim might indeed imply this *if* we came into existence as fully formed persons, as Athena emerged from the head of Zeus. In that case, death immediately after beginning to exist might plausibly be regarded as a tragedy. But we instead begin to exist as barely conscious beings with no psychological connections to our own future selves. As I have argued elsewhere, death is not a significant harm to such beings.¹⁰ So while there is someone for whom death is worse even when it occurs immediately following the beginning of existence, it is worse only to a slight degree. Hence there is no morally significant difference between ceasing to exist immediately after beginning to exist and never existing at all, even though the former may be worse or better in individual-affecting terms while the latter cannot be.

Given that being caused to exist can be neither better nor worse for the individual who comes into existence, the view that morality takes an exclusively individual-affecting form implies what I will call the Individual-Affecting Symmetry view of the morality of procreation. According to this view, there is complete moral symmetry between the creation of happy people and the creation of miserable people. Apart from the effects on people who already exist or who will exist, or will exist independently of one's procreative choice, it is a matter of moral indifference whether one causes a happy person or a miserable person to exist. Where the possible interests of possible persons are concerned, there is no reason to cause a happy person to exist, though no reason not to; similarly, there is no reason to cause a miserable person to exist but also no reason not to. This last implication of the view is, however, intuitively unacceptable. A view that implies that there is no moral reason not to cause an individual to exist whose life would be filled with intrinsically bad states, uncompensated for by intrinsically good states, cannot be true.

Some philosophers who were among the earliest to respond to Parfit's challenges to the view that morality takes a wholly individual-affecting form argued that it is not intolerable if the view implies the permissibility of causing miserable people to exist, for it also implies that there would be a moral requirement to euthanize any individual whose life would be miserable as soon as he or she began to exist. This could conceivably be an adequate response if euthanasia were always possible the instant such an individual began to exist and before he or she became a person whose consent would be required for euthanasia to be permissible. But given that in practice it is sometimes possible to prevent the existence of individuals whose miserable lives would not or could not be ended until after they had already endured great suffering, it seems that we must recognize that at least in such cases there is a moral reason not to cause such a person to exist, and that this reason need not have anything to do with the interests of others.

3.6 The Antinatalist Symmetry View

As I have noted, the Asymmetry seems to presuppose that intrinsically bad states have not only negative individual-affecting value but also negative impersonal value. There is not only an individual-affecting reason not to cause an existing individual to suffer something bad but also an impersonal reason not to cause a miserable person to exist, since this would cause him to suffer uncompensated bads. It would be bad for him—a noncomparative harm—even though it would not be worse for him. It *would* be worse, but not for him: it would be worse only impersonally. Common sense morality, of which the Asymmetry is an element, accepts that intrinsically good states have individual-affecting value: there is, in general, a moral reason to benefit existing individuals, or to cause them to have intrinsic goods in their lives when this is overall better for them. But there is no reason to bestow noncomparative benefits by causing happy people to exist. Common sense morality does, however, recognize the permissibility, in general, of causing happy people to exist. In doing so, it implicitly concedes that intrinsic goods or noncomparative benefits have a kind of impersonal value in procreative choices. While they do not have impersonal reason-giving value, they do have impersonal canceling value. The intrinsically bad states that any life will inevitably contain have impersonal reason-giving weight: they count morally against procreation. This is a presupposition of the Asymmetry. So in order for procreation to be permissible, there must be other values that weigh against these bads. In most cases, the desires and interests of preexisting people weigh against them. But unless individual-affecting value has in general much greater weight than impersonal value, these considerations are seldom sufficient, on their own, to outweigh the impersonal reason not to cause an individual to exist that derives from the fact that his life will inevitably contain a great deal of suffering and other intrinsic bads. What makes procreation morally permissible in most cases is the reasonable expectation that the bads in a possible person's life will be outweighed, and significantly outweighed, by the goods. The goods that a possible person's life would contain thus have impersonal canceling value, even though they do not have impersonal reason-giving value. This is the presupposition that allows common sense morality to recognize the permissibility of causing happy people to exist (or at least happy people with lives above some threshold of well-being), given its recognition that the bads that an individual's life would contain ground an impersonal reason not to cause that individual to exist, or even a reason to prevent that individual from existing.

Yet, as I noted earlier, it seems odd to suppose that the goods an individual's life would contain have impersonal canceling value but not impersonal reason-giving value. It might be theoretically more consistent to deny that goods have any impersonal value of any kind. One might claim that while bads have four kinds of value—individual-affecting reason-giving value, individual-affecting canceling value, impersonal reason-giving value, and impersonal canceling value—goods have only two: individual-affecting reason-giving value and individual-affecting canceling value. In other words, while bads have both individual-affecting and impersonal value, goods have only individual-affecting value. They have no impersonal value of any kind.

This view seems to be implicit in many passages in David Benatar's recent book, *Better Never to Have Been*, which argues against the general moral permissibility of procreation. Benatar writes, for example, that "the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone, whereas. . .the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation."¹¹ He then argues for these claims on the ground that they have "considerable explanatory power," citing as the first and main example of this power that they explain and justify the Asymmetry. They provide, he claims,

the best explanation for the view that while there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, there is no duty to bring happy people into being. In other words, the reason why we think that there is a duty not to bring suffering people into existence is that the presence of this suffering would be bad (for the sufferers) and the absence of the suffering is good (even though there is nobody to enjoy the absence of suffering). In contrast to this, we think that there is no duty to bring happy people into existence because while their pleasure would be good for them, its absence would not be bad for them (given that there would be nobody who would be deprived of it).¹²

According to the view advanced in this passage, it is not a reason to cause happy people to exist that this would be good for them in noncomparative individual-affecting terms. And it is not good for them in ordinary individual-affecting terms to be caused to exist—that is, it is not better for them, since their not existing would not be worse, or even bad, for them. Nor is there an impersonal reason to cause them to exist. For it is implicit in the final sentence of this passage that if not causing them to exist would not deprive them of goods and thus would not be bad or worse *for them*, it cannot be bad or worse in *any* way relevant to our duties. The absence of the good their lives would have contained might or might not be bad impersonally, but even if it is, that is irrelevant, according to Benatar.

But matters are different, he claims, in the case of suffering. If miserable people are not caused to exist, this is good, or better than if they were caused to exist, even if there is no one for whom it is good, or better. There seems to be no way to understand this claim except as a claim about impersonal value. If it is good that suffering or miserable people do not exist, even though it is not good or better for anyone, how else can we understand the status of this good except as a good that is not *good for*—that is, except as an impersonal good?

So suppose we accept that bads have both individual-affecting and impersonal value, while goods have only individual-affecting value. If we deny not only that goods have impersonal reason-giving value but also that they have impersonal canceling value, we arrive at the view that Benatar defends: that procreation is in practice always bad in its effects on the individual who is caused to exist, so that it can be justified only by reference to the interests of others. For the bads that a life would contain count against procreation and goods do not count in favor, even to the extent of weighing against and canceling out the bads. If a life would contain a single bad, that bad is uncompensated for no matter how much good the life would contain, so it is wrong to create the life unless the benefits to others outweigh the noncomparative harm to the person whose life it would be.

We can follow Benatar in describing this view as “antinatalist.” We can thus call the view that there is a moral reason not to cause a miserable person to exist and a moral reason not to cause a happy person to exist the *Antinatalist Symmetry* view. This view is in one respect the antithesis of the Individual-Affecting Symmetry, which holds that there is no reason not to cause a miserable person to exist and no reason not to cause a happy person to exist—though it also holds that there is no reason to cause either to exist.

Although I have introduced this view by reference to some suggestive passages in his book, Benatar himself denies that the basis of his antinatalist view is that bads have impersonal value while goods do not, so that it is good if the bads that a life would contain are never created, independently of whether they would be accompanied by greater goods if they were created.¹³ He seems, in fact, to reject impersonal values and writes as if his view were supported entirely by individual-affecting considerations. It is instructive to look at what he says, as it helps to show why an asymmetrical view is difficult to defend.

Benatar writes that “we have a strong moral reason, *grounded in the interests of potential people*, to avoid creating unhappy people.”¹⁴ And in a footnote appended to this sentence, he explicitly contrasts his view with an impersonal view, noting that “the condition that the moral reason (or duty) be grounded in the interests of the potential person is an important one. Those who find plausibility in the claim that we have a reason to create happy people tend to be motivated by impersonal considerations—such as there being more happiness in the world. But these are not considerations about the interests of the potential person.”¹⁵ Yet how can the reason not to cause a miserable person to exist be grounded in the interests of the potential person when, if there were a reason to cause a happy person to exist, it would have to be grounded in impersonal considerations? Here is what Benatar says of a person, X, who never existed but would have had a pleasurable life if he had: “if the absence of pleasure... is ‘bad’ rather than ‘not bad’ then we should have to regret, *for X’s sake*, that X did not come into existence. But it is not regrettable.”¹⁶ Yet a parallel claim can be made about a person, Y, who never existed but who would have been miserable if he had: if the absence of suffering or misery is “good” rather than “neither good nor bad,” we should have to be *relieved, for S’s sake*, that S did not come into existence. Yet there is no one for whom we can feel relieved.

In short, if there is an individual-affecting reason not to cause a miserable person to exist, there should be an individual-affecting reason to cause a happy person to exist as well. Indeed, it may even make more sense to suppose that there can be an individual-affecting reason to cause a happy person to exist, for if one acts on that reason there will be an actual individual for whom the act was good, whereas if one acts on the reason not to cause a miserable person to exist, there will be no one for whom the act was good. Yet there cannot be individual-affecting reasons either to cause people to exist or not to cause them to exist (other, of course, than any reasons based on effects on others). The reason to cause an individual to exist and the reason not to cause an individual to exist must be impersonal. It is true, of course, that if one causes a miserable person to exist, there will be someone for whom one’s act was bad; but it is also true that if one causes a happy person to exist, there will be

someone for whom one's act was good. If one does not cause a happy person to exist, there will of course be no one for whom that is bad; but it is also true that if one does not cause a miserable person to exist, there will be no one for whom that is good. The cases are exactly alike except that one involves a life that worth living while the other involves a life that is not worth living. It is for this reason that asymmetrical views of procreation are difficult to defend.

If we accept, as we must, that there is a strong moral reason not to cause a miserable person to exist, we must accept that there are values and reasons that are impersonal. If we believe that the reason not to cause a person to exist if his life would be miserable is no weaker than the reason not to cause an existing person to suffer an equivalent amount of misery, we must accept that at least in some cases, impersonal reasons have the same strength as corresponding individual-affecting reasons.¹⁷ It is the second of the two claims that together constitute the Asymmetry that is more difficult to defend. One way to defend it is to deny that goods have impersonal value. The denial that they have any kind of impersonal value at all entails the Antinatalist Symmetry. If that view had intuitively compelling implications, we might accept it despite the fact that it denies to goods the impersonal value it assigns to bads, apparently without any theoretical justification. Yet its implications—principally the implication that there is always a strong moral presumption against procreation—are profoundly counterintuitive. We can, of course, adopt the weaker claim that goods have impersonal canceling value while lacking impersonal reason-giving value. This yields the common sense Asymmetry. But this understanding of the value of goods seems even more arbitrary and ad hoc than the suggestion that they lack impersonal value of any sort.

3.7 The Impersonal Symmetry View

A further possibility is that both bads and goods have all the same kinds of value: both individual-affecting and impersonal reason-giving value and individual-affecting and impersonal canceling value. The apparent arbitrariness of claiming that bads and goods have different kinds of value forms the basis of a rather simple argument, which I call the *Symmetry Argument*, for a view of the morality of procreation that I call the *Impersonal Symmetry* view.¹⁸ The argument is as follows.

1. To cause a miserable person to exist is bad for him, and harms him noncomparatively, even though it is not worse for him than never existing.
2. There is an impersonal moral reason not to do what would be noncomparatively bad for an individual.
3. There is therefore a reason not to cause a miserable person to exist.
4. To cause a happy person to exist is good for him, and benefits him noncomparatively, even though it is not better for him than never existing.
5. Just as there is an impersonal reason not to do what would be noncomparatively bad for an individual, so there is an impersonal reason of the same strength to do what would be equivalently noncomparatively good for an individual.
6. There is therefore a reason to cause a happy person to exist.

Claim 3 of the Symmetry Argument is the first of the two claims that constitute the Asymmetry. Claims 1 and 2 plausibly explain why 3 is true. Because claims 1 through 3 seem compelling, and claims 4 through 6 are identical except that they refer to a life that is worth living rather than to a life that is not worth living, this argument is difficult to resist. But I think we must find a way to resist it, for its implications seem quite literally unacceptable. Here are some of what seem to be implications of the Impersonal Asymmetry.

- (1) The moral reason not to cause a miserable person to exist is no stronger than the moral reason to cause an equivalently happy person to exist.
- (2) If the reason not to cause a miserable person to exist is as strong as the reason not to cause an equivalent amount of misery to an existing person, the reason to cause a happy person to exist should also be as strong as the reason to provide equivalent benefits to existing people.
- (3) If one could either produce a certain amount of good by causing a happy person to exist or prevent existing people from losing a slightly lesser amount of good, one ought, other things being equal, to cause the happy person to exist.
- (4) Grant the metaphysical assumption that is most favorable to the permissibility of abortion: that we do not begin to exist until the fetal brain acquires the capacity for consciousness, so that most abortions do not involve killing someone like you or me but instead merely prevent one of us from existing.¹⁹ Even on this assumption, if actively preventing a good is more objectionable than failing to create a good, then even early abortion is *more* objectionable morally than failing to cause a happy person to exist, which is just as objectionable as causing the existence of an equivalently miserable person.²⁰
- (5) Saving a person's life does not prevent him from suffering anything intrinsically bad; rather, it merely prevents him from losing the goods of his future life. So both saving the life of a happy person and causing a happy person to exist involve enabling a person to have intrinsic goods. From an impersonal point of view, therefore, the reason to cause a happy person to exist may be just as strong as the reason to save the life of a happy person—indeed, it is usually stronger given that in general causing a person to exist produces more good than saving a life preserves.
- (6) Because death involves only the loss of goods rather than the suffering of anything intrinsically bad, and since an entire life generally contains more good than the *remainder* of another life, it may also be worse in impersonal terms not to cause a happy person to exist than it is to kill an existing person.

These implications are concerned only with comparisons between failing to cause happy people to exist and failing to benefit existing people. But if implication 1 is correct and if the reason not to cause a miserable person to exist is as strong, or even only half as strong, as the reason not to cause an existing person to suffer an equivalent amount of misery, there must then be a further range of disturbing implications concerning comparisons between failing to cause happy people to exist and failing to prevent suffering and misery among existing people, or even causing suffering among existing people.

The implausibility of some of these implications can be mitigated by appealing to the distinctions between doing and not doing and harming and benefiting. As I pointed out earlier, these distinctions provide grounds for the claim that it is more seriously objectionable to cause a miserable person to exist than it is to cause a happy person to exist. Yet most of the implications just cited involve equivalences between different forms of *not benefiting*. Thus, for example, just as the failure to cause a happy person to exist is an instance of not benefiting, so the failure to save a person is also an instance of not benefiting, in that it involves a failure to prevent a loss of (or decline in) positive well-being. It does, admittedly, involve a failure to prevent what in ordinary language is called a harm—death—but it does not involve a failure to prevent anything intrinsically bad. In impersonal terms, the difference between the failure to cause a happy person to exist and the failure to save a person is just the difference between the failure to create goods and the failure to prevent the loss of goods.

Another response to the unacceptability of the implications of the Impersonal Symmetry is to claim that individual-affecting values and reasons have a general priority over impersonal values and reasons. That is, one might accept that both bads and goods have impersonal value and ground impersonal reasons, but that impersonal values ground weaker reasons than corresponding individual-affecting values. For example, it might be that there is an impersonal reason to cause a happy person to exist but that this reason is weaker by some degree than the corresponding individual-affecting reason to produce an equivalent range of benefits for existing people. In general, there is a stronger reason to produce a good by benefiting an existing person than there is to produce an equivalent noncomparative benefit by causing a new person to exist.

One objection to this proposal is that it seems to be more plausible in the case of goods than in the case of bads. For as I remarked earlier, it may seem that the reason not to cause a miserable person to exist is as strong as the reason not to cause an existing person to suffer an equivalent amount of misery. Or at any rate the former reason is closer in strength to the latter than the reason to cause a happy person to exist is to the reason to benefit an existing person or existing people to an equivalent degree. One might express this suggestion by saying that the impersonal reason-giving value of bads is greater than the impersonal reason-giving value of equivalent goods.

Despite this concern, it seems that we can plausibly reject some of the most disturbing implications of the Impersonal Symmetry by appealing both to the distinction between harming and benefiting and to the claim that at least some individual-affecting reasons are stronger than corresponding impersonal reasons. This would allow us to accept that there are impersonal reasons, and thus to accept the core claims 2 and 5 of the Symmetry Argument, without embracing the Impersonal Symmetry. We can instead accept some version of the Weak Asymmetry.²¹

3.8 Conclusion

Yet because the Weak Asymmetry concedes that there is an impersonal reason to cause happy people to exist, it seems to entail weaker versions of many of the

counterintuitive implications of the Impersonal Symmetry. It seems, for example, to imply all of the following.

- (1) The reason to cause happy people to exist can in certain cases be stronger than the reason to benefit existing people by giving them lesser goods.
- (2) The reason to cause happy people to exist can in certain cases be stronger than the reason to benefit existing people by enabling them to retain or to have goods they would otherwise lose or fail to obtain.
- (3) There is a moral presumption against the permissibility of abortion on the ground that it prevents the existence of a happy person.
- (4) There is some number of happy people such that one's moral reason to cause them to exist would be stronger than and, in a case of conflict, outweigh one's reason to save the life of an existing person.

These claims, while perhaps not impossible to accept, are nevertheless very difficult to believe. It may be that the only view that captures our strongest intuitions about the morality of procreation is the Asymmetry. Yet, as I hope I have indicated in this paper, the prospects for finding a compelling theoretical defense of the Asymmetry are not promising.

Acknowledgements I am grateful to Dan Halliday, Richard Kraut, Derek Parfit, and Dominic Wilkinson for comments on an earlier draft.

Notes

1. McMahan (1981), p. 100.
2. I here modify Derek Parfit's term "person-affecting," since things may be better or worse for individuals who are not persons in the same way that they may be better or worse for persons. Those who believe that there are irreducible collective entities for which things may be better or worse might wish to have a category of "group-affecting" value as well. See Parfit (1984), p. 370.
3. For a more detailed exposition of this view, see McMahan (1988), pp. 34–5.
4. See, for example, McMahan (2001), pp. 445–75 (Section IV).
5. For a powerful defense of this view, see Temkin (2003), pp. 761–82.
6. There may be reasons to doubt whether the distinction between the reason-giving function of a value and the canceling function of that value is coherent. But it is hard to see how one could make sense of the Asymmetry if there were no such distinction.
7. Kamm (1992), p. 132.
8. Benatar (2006), p. 45. As we will see, on Benatar's own view, the canceling weight of goods is discounted all the way to zero in procreative choice.
9. See, for example, Heyd (1992). For further discussion of the individual-affecting view, see my review of Heyd's book, McMahan (1994), pp. 557–9.
10. McMahan (2002), pp. 165–85.
11. Benatar (2006), p. 30.
12. Benatar (2006), pp. 31 and 32.
13. Benatar has confirmed this to me in conversation.
14. Benatar (2006), p. 33. Emphasis added.
15. Benatar (2006).
16. Benatar (2006), p. 39. Emphasis added.

17. This leaves it open that in some cases the individual-affecting reasons are stronger. See McMahan, (2001), Section IV.
18. I first advanced this argument in my doctoral dissertation, "Problems of Population Theory" (Cambridge University, 1986), and published it subsequently in McMahan (1995), pp. 182–200.
19. I have defended this view in McMahan (2002).
20. For an argument against abortion that appeals, though not directly, to the view that goods have impersonal reason-giving value, see Hare (1975), pp. 201–22.
21. Elizabeth Harman embraces a version of the Weak Asymmetry in Harman (2004), pp. 97–8.

References

- Benatar, D. 2006. *Better never to have been: The harm of coming into existence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hare, R. M. 1975. Abortion and the golden rule. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 4: 201–22.
- Harman, E. 2004. Can we harm and benefit in creating? *Philosophical Perspectives* 18: 89–113.
- Heyd, D. 1992. *Genethics: Moral issues in the creation of people*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kamm, F. M. 1992. *Creation and abortion*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- McMahan, J. 1981. Problems of population theory. *Ethics* 92: 96–127.
- McMahan, J. 1988. Death and the value of life. *Ethics* 99: 32–61.
- McMahan, J. 1994. Review of David Heyd, *Genethics: Moral issues in the creation of people*. *The Philosophical Review* 103: 557–9.
- McMahan, J. 1995. La moralita del causare l'esistenza di persone. *Bioetica* 2: 182–200.
- McMahan, J. 2001. Wrongful life: Paradoxes in the morality of causing people to exist (revised). In *Bioethics*, ed. J. Harris. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McMahan, J. 2002. *The ethics of killing: Problems at the margins of life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Temkin, L. 2003. Egalitarianism defended. *Ethics* 113: 764–82.