

## Unraveling the Asymmetry in Procreative Ethics

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### 1. Introduction

The Asymmetry in the ethics of procreation consists of two distinct ethical claims. The first is that it is morally *wrong* to bring into existence a child who will have an abjectly miserable life; the second is that it is *permissible* not to bring into existence a child who will enjoy a very happy life.<sup>1</sup> Both claims of the Asymmetry are supported by strong moral intuitions, but finding a plausible moral theory which can accommodate both claims has proven a difficult task. In fact, the inability to provide coherent theoretical support for the Asymmetry has led some authors to reject it (e.g., McMahan 2009, Persson 2009, Singer 1993). Other philosophers have posed creative, though controversial, ways of vindicating this view (e.g., Benatar 2006, esp. pp. 32-34; Roberts 2011b).

In this paper, I distinguish between two variations of the Asymmetry. The first is the Abstract Asymmetry, the idealized variation of the Asymmetry that many philosophers have been trying to solve. The second is the Real-World Asymmetry, a non-idealized variation that applies explicitly to cases of ordinary human reproduction. I argue that the Real-World

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<sup>1</sup> McMahan (1981, p. 100) was the first to give this union of claims this title, and most other philosophers have followed his lead when referring to this issue.

Asymmetry can be defended by properly acknowledging the general wrongness of causing someone else to suffer, the limits of what morality can reasonably demand of us, and the significance of respecting women’s autonomy. I then argue that the Abstract Asymmetry, which is idealized in ways that eliminate the import of morality’s demandingness and respect for women’s autonomy, is indefensible. We lack good reason to think our intuitions underlying the Abstract Asymmetry are reliable, and the Abstract Asymmetry also conflicts with a plausible moral principle.

**2. Distinguishing Two Asymmetries**

I have already described the Asymmetry in broad terms, but it is actually ambiguous between two different sets of claims. Here is the first set of claims, as described by Melinda Roberts (2011a, p. 765):

Claim 1: It would be wrong to bring a miserable child – a child whose life is less than worth living – into existence.

Claim 2: It would be permissible not to bring a happy child – a child whose life is worth living or even well worth living – into existence.

These claims are illuminated more explicitly in the graph below:

| Level of Individual Welfare | Act a1 at World w1: cause Meg to exist in World w1 | Act a2 in World w2: cause Meg not to exist in World w2 | Act a3 in World 3: cause Hans not to exist in World w3 | Act a4 in World w4: cause Hans to exist in World w4 |
|-----------------------------|--|--|--|---|
| +100                        |  |  |  | <b>Hans</b>   |
| 0                           |  | Meg  | Hans   |   |
|                             |  |  |  |   |

|      |                                   |  |   |  |
|------|-----------------------------------|--|---|--|
| -100 | <b>Meg</b>                        |  |   |  |
|      | Claim 1: Act a1 is morally wrong. |  | Claim 2: Act a3 is morally permissible. |  |

*Figure 1: The Asymmetry<sup>2</sup>*

In Figure 1, we have two procreative choices to make. We are choosing whether or not to bring Meg into existence (shown in worlds w1 and w2), and we are choosing whether or not to bring Hans into existence. In the graph, Meg and Hans only exist in the worlds where their names are bolded, and the choices of whether to bring them into existence are independent from one another (i.e., Meg's existence or nonexistence has no impact on Hans and vice-versa). If Meg were to come into existence, she would have a dreadful life characterized by great and persistent suffering. In contrast, if Hans were to come into existence, he would have one of the best lives possible. It would be wrong to perform act a1: we ought not to bring Meg into existence. In contrast, it would be permissible to perform act a3: we may permissibly choose not to bring Hans into existence. The central puzzle of the Asymmetry is how we can explain why act a1 is obligatory while act a3 is not.

But there is something peculiar about this presentation of the Asymmetry. Meg and Hans are the only individuals affected by their coming into existence; no one else's welfare is altered. It is as if we are to imagine pushing buttons regarding which world we bring about: the corresponding person simply pops into existence with a home, an education, and a suitable job.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this thought experiment is much different than the actual process of conceiving and

<sup>2</sup> This graph is adapted from Roberts (2011a, p. 766; 2011b, p. 345) She assumes that we can compare the welfare of those who exist with those who do not exist and represents nonexistence with a welfare level of 0. This claim is controversial (Feldman 1991, Holtug 2001, Roberts 2003), but for the purposes of graphing the asymmetry, I consider it an acceptable assumption.

<sup>3</sup> Melinda Roberts presented the choice to bring Hans into existence in this manner when she discussed the Asymmetry during an invited lecture at the University of Tennessee.

raising a child, which requires substantial long-term investments of physical and emotional energy – especially for women, since they are the ones who gestate children.

Let us call the Asymmetry portrayed by the union of Claims 1 and 2 (and depicted in Roberts' graph) the *Abstract Asymmetry*. Given its idealized nature, the Abstract Asymmetry can be contrasted with another Asymmetry, which I represent as the union of Claims 3 and 4:

Claim 3: Under ordinary conditions of human reproduction, people are not morally permitted to bring a child into existence who would have an abjectly miserable life.

Claim 4: Under ordinary conditions of human reproduction, people are not morally obligated to bring a child into existence who would have a very happy life.

Since Claims 3 and 4 are explicitly grounded in the conditions of typical human reproduction, call their union the *Real-World Asymmetry*. Also notice that both claims in the Real-World Asymmetry leave open the possibility that there can be extreme circumstances where we are obligated to perform these actions, such as if the only way to save the world were to bring a child into existence who would live a miserable life or if procreation were required for the continuation of the human species.<sup>4</sup> If we wish to defend the view that presently living human couples should refrain from bringing into existence children that would live miserable lives but are not similarly obligated to conceive and raise children who would live happy lives, then affirming Claims 3 and 4 are sufficient: we do not need to defend the Abstract Asymmetry to secure this result.

Now the pivotal question emerges: can we secure the Real-World Asymmetry?

Moreover, can we secure it more easily than the Abstract Asymmetry? We can start by trying to get the Real-World Asymmetry in hand.

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<sup>4</sup> A duty to procreate might not be limited to such extreme scenarios. Saul Smilansky (1995, pp. 46-48) offers eight distinct reasons that might give rise to an obligation to procreate.

### 3. Securing the Real-World Asymmetry

To secure the Real-World Asymmetry, we can appeal to three fairly basic ethical principles. We will begin with Claim 3. This principle is well-supported by the general moral duty to avoid causing suffering. It is morally bad that people suffer, and *prima facie* we ought not to cause other people to suffer if we can avoid doing so. Moreover, in the circumstances specified by Claim 3, the suffering of the child would be *extremely* bad. Thus, a child should only be forced to endure this kind of life in desperate and outlandish circumstances.

Securing Claim 3 is straightforward, but securing Claim 4 is more challenging. If a person's suffering is a strong moral reason not to bring a person into existence, then why would a person's happiness not be a strong moral reason in favor of bringing a person into existence? It seems very difficult to deny that the creation of person with a happy life is a morally good thing. This fact alone – the fact that an action makes the world a better place in some way – appears to provide a moral reason to perform that action. But if that is correct, then one fears that people will frequently have a moral obligation to have children. So how can Claim 4 be supported?

There are two promising routes to securing Claim 4. The first stems from the recognition that morality does not demand that we always perform the action that maximizes the good. After all, there are some actions, even in the realm of procreation, that are supererogatory – morally good to do but not morally required. Judith Thompson (1971, pp. 48-49) provided a famous example of such a case more than 40 years ago. Suppose you wake up to discover that you are strapped to a famous violinist who has a fatal kidney ailment. You were kidnapped during the night by the Society of Music Lovers, and because you are the only one who matches the violinist's blood type, the violinist's circulatory system is now connected to yours so that the

violinist may make use of your kidneys. The violinist must remain connected for nine months to recover; then he can be safely disconnected. In critically reflecting on this case, almost everyone agrees that it would be permissible for you to disconnect yourself from the violinist even though the benefit to him and the Society of Music Lovers would vastly outweigh the burdens you must endure for nine months. One of the central reasons for thinking that it is permissible to disconnect from the violinist is that there are limits to what morality can demand of us: there are certain situations where we can sensibly say that an action would be a morally good thing to do but that we cannot be required to do it.

Bringing the happy child into existence might be a good thing to do, but it cannot be required of anyone. The responsibilities and burdens associated with childbirth and parenting are among the greatest and most demanding that a person can experience in her lifetime. Pregnancy can be the most physically and emotionally challenging experience of a woman's life and frequently affects her physical appearance for the remainder of her life. Caring for children is no easy task either. The investments of time, emotion, and financial resources required to be a good parent are extraordinary. They are also enduring: children do not typically leave their parents' care until they are close to twenty years old. Burdens this significant and this long-lasting cannot be required of anyone. While many happily embrace these duties and find the rewards of parenting far greater than the burdens, we must not force people to bear such burdens when they do not want to endure them.

Some philosophers resist this burden-based defense of Claim 4. David Benatar (2006), for example, argues that this defense is unsatisfactory because "it implies in the absence of this sacrifice we *would* have a duty to bring happy people into existence. In other words, it would be wrong not to create such people if we could create them without great cost to ourselves" (p. 33).

Benatar is right about this implication but wrong to think it problematic. If the ways in which we were born and developed into adults were radically different (such that they did not impose these costs on us), then it's quite reasonable to suppose that our duties with regard to reproduction and parenting would be very different. Drastically changing a morally salient factor in a particular case will often affect our evaluation of that case. This result should not bother us because all instances of procreation in fact *do* involve substantial costs that someone must bear.

A further response to Benatar's objection stems from an important observation related to these costs: women typically bear more of the reproductive costs than men. Some of these costs are physical – the result of differences in male and female biology. Others are culturally enforced: women are still generally expected to bear more of the responsibilities of childcare than men in most of the world. Thus, proper concern for gender equity and respect for women's autonomy also generates strong support for Claim 4. An obligation to produce as many happy children as possible would force many women to live lives devoted almost entirely to reproduction; they would lack the freedom to pursue any other ambitions or goals (Overall 2012, pp. 73-75). Such an outcome is morally unacceptable even if the happiness of the children outweighed the suffering and inconvenience of the women who gestated (and likely raised) all these children.

We now see how the Real-World Asymmetry can be vindicated. Claim 3 can be supported by a general duty to avoid causing suffering. Claim 4 can be supported by acknowledging that even though increasing overall happiness is a moral reason to perform an action, other factors – namely, the burdens associated with gestating and raising children and the importance of respecting women's autonomy – outweigh this consideration in the case of reproduction.

However, we should reflect a bit more on the sentiment underlying Benatar's objection. Perhaps the true worry is that intuitively the Real-World Asymmetry is not strong enough to capture our deepest convictions about the ethics of reproduction. Other philosophers have expressed a similar concern. Roberts (2011b) suggests not only that the Abstract Asymmetry is highly intuitive but also that Claims 1 and 2 might be "important constraints on any adequate moral theory" (p. 2). Similarly, McMahan (2002) claims that the Abstract Asymmetry is "deeply intuitive and probably impossible to dislodge" (p. 300). Despite these protests, I argue in the next section that the Abstract Asymmetry must be rejected.

## **6. Abandoning the Abstract Asymmetry**

The primary support for the Abstract Asymmetry is an intuition that some philosophers claim to hold quite deeply. When we consider the details of the Abstract Asymmetry, however, it is difficult to understand why these intuitions are so deeply held. The Abstract Asymmetry is, as I mentioned earlier, a case of procreation in a vacuum. Referring back to Figure 1, worlds  $w_1$  and  $w_2$  are identical except that Meg exists with -100 welfare in  $w_1$  and does not exist in  $w_2$ , and worlds  $w_3$  and  $w_4$  are identical except that Hans exists in  $w_4$  with +100 welfare and does not exist in  $w_3$ . Everything else in these worlds remains unaffected by Meg and Hans' existence or nonexistence. Given these idealized circumstances, how could anyone have a clear intuition about what our reproductive obligations are? No human being has ever witnessed or experienced a case of genuinely costless procreation, so it is neither realistic nor sensible to think that we could have fine-tuned, reliable intuitions about this kind of reproduction. As a result, we should be suspicious of our intuitions about the Abstract Asymmetry and not hesitate to revise them in



the presence of a good reason to reject it. Moreover, I believe there is at least one good reason to reject the Abstract Asymmetry.

Claim 2 of the Abstract Asymmetry – which states that there is no obligation to bring Hans into existence – is false because it violates this moral principle:

*Goodness for Free:* If we can perform an action that causes something good to happen without sacrificing anything at all, we are morally obligated to perform that action.

Since virtually every moral decision we make involves some moral or non-moral costs, this principle is almost never applicable to ordinary moral decisions. However, it is applicable to Claim 2. We can bring Hans into existence at no costs, moral or otherwise, to ourselves or anyone else. Given that Hans would have an extremely happy life, bringing him into existence would be a morally good thing to do. That an action causes something good to happen surely counts as a morally salient reason to perform that action. That reason can be overridden by other considerations (such as the two I mentioned in discussion of Claim 4), but the Abstract Asymmetry is deliberately constructed so as to eliminate all other morally relevant considerations. Thus, defenders of Claim 2 do not have a countervailing reason that they can offer for not bringing Hans into existence. We are left with a morally salient reason to bring Hans into existence and *no reasons at all* not to bring him into existence. Thus, consistent with *Goodness for Free*, we are obligated to bring Hans into existence under the conditions specified by the Abstract Asymmetry.

By abstracting away from the real-world conditions of reproduction, defenders of the Abstract Asymmetry have inadvertently made Claim 2 indefensible. The only apparent support that can be offered for it is an appeal to intuitions, and these intuitions concern a case utterly unfamiliar to us – one far different from ordinary human reproduction. Even assuming that moral

intuitions are useful as starting points for ethical inquiry and that they might sometimes serve as appropriate checks on whether a theory generates plausible answers cases, we cannot rely on moral intuitions alone when we encounter realms of ethical thought that are unfamiliar to us. Our intuitions are clearest and most reliable regarding situations that manifest frequently in the world around us and invite our introspection. But a case of procreation that does not have any impact on anyone else in the world is in no way this kind of scenario. Thus, it is unsurprising that our intuitions about it go awry.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that the Abstract Asymmetry, which has been the subject of much philosophical discussion, should be rejected. Fortunately, there is a less idealized set of claims, which constitute the Real-World Asymmetry, that can be secured rather easily. These claims are sufficient to establish that, in nearly all cases of ordinary human reproduction, it is wrong to bring a child into existence who would have a miserable life but not obligatory to bring a child into existence who would have a happy life. This Asymmetry is not the one that every philosopher intuitively desires, but it must suffice: its abstract counterpart is indefensible.

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