

Asymmetries of Value-Based Reasons¹

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Abstract

Many have offered accounts of the procreative asymmetry, the claim that one has no moral reason to create a life just because it would be happy, but one has moral reason not to create a life just because it would be miserable. I suggest a new approach. Instead of looking at the procreative asymmetry on its own, we can situate it within a broader landscape of asymmetries. Specifically, there are two other analogous asymmetries in the prudential and epistemic domains. The prudential asymmetry says that one has no prudential reason to acquire a desire just because it would be satisfied, but one has prudential reason not to acquire a desire just because it would be frustrated. The epistemic asymmetry says that one has no epistemic reason to acquire a belief just because it is true, but one has epistemic reason not to acquire a belief just because it is false. The existence of these analogous asymmetries in these normative domains suggests the possibility of a unified account of all three asymmetries as instances of a more fundamental asymmetry of value-based reasons. This paper develops a working model of what such a unified account might look like. Such an account can give us a unified explanation of a variety of phenomena, reinforce the plausibility of each of these asymmetries, and give us a novel picture of how value gives us reasons that might extend beyond these three applications.

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1 Introduction

Suppose one can choose between not creating a life and creating a life full of suffering. Most would agree that one has moral reason not to choose the latter. But when choosing between not creating a life and creating a life full of happiness, many would agree that it is permissible for one to choose the latter, but one has no moral reason to do so. These intuitions suggest the following asymmetry:

Procreative Asymmetry: one has moral reason not to create a life just because it would be miserable, but one has no moral reason to create a life just because it would be happy.

Besides its intuitive support, some also see the procreative asymmetry as representing a desirable approach towards theorizing about ethics, as captured by Narveson's (1967) slogan that ethics is about 'making people happy, not making happy people'.

My main goal in this paper is to explore a new approach for explaining the procreative asymmetry by situating it within a broader landscape of asymmetries. I first observe that there are two other analogous asymmetries of value-based reasons in the prudential and epistemic domains. The existence of these analogous asymmetries in three closely related normative domains suggests the possibility of a unified account of all three asymmetries. I then present a unified account that treats these asymmetries as instances of a more fundamental asymmetry which I shall call *the Foreseen Value Asymmetry*. Combined with a view about population axiology with a certain structure and its plausible epistemic and prudential analogues, the Foreseen Value Asymmetry can offer a unified explanation of all three asymmetries.

2 The Asymmetries

2.1 *The Prudential Asymmetry*

Let us begin by considering the following case:

Drug Addict: Mary is currently not addicted to a new recreational drug and has no desire for it. If she tries it, she will get addicted and desire the drug intensely every morning. Before she decides to try it, she can consult her local friendly drug dealer and will know for certain that one of two things will be true: either her dealer can offer her a long-lasting and unlimited supply for free, or the dealer has no steady supply and the addiction will be too expensive for Mary.²

Intuitively, if the dealer has no free and steady supply of the drug, Mary should not try it. If she did, she would acquire a desire for the drug that would be frustrated. As her friend, I have reason of beneficence to advise against trying it on that ground. However, if the dealer has a free and steady supply, that fact alone does not seem to give Mary any prudential reason to try the drug, even though it guarantees that if Mary were to try it, her future desire for the drug would be satisfied. I can hardly make a convincing case to her that she should try it by merely citing the fact that she can afford it.

One lesson we can draw from cases like Drug Addict is that even though it is natural to think that one has prudential reasons to satisfy one's existing desires because there is something good about satisfying them, there is an asymmetry when it comes to desires one does not yet possess. One has prudential reasons to avoid frustrating a desire regardless of whether one already possesses the desire or not, meaning that one has a prudential reason not to acquire a desire just because one cannot satisfy it. However, for a desire one does not currently possess, the fact that

² This is a modified version of Parfit's (1984) case in Appendix I.

one could satisfy it does not seem to give one prudential reason to acquire it.³ We can formulate this thought as the following asymmetry:

Prudential Asymmetry: one has prudential reason not to acquire a desire just because it would be frustrated, but one has no prudential reason to acquire a desire just because it would be satisfied.

To strengthen our case for the prudential asymmetry, three clarifications are in order. First, one might think that there are prudential reasons to acquire desires for knowledge, beauty, and morality, even if one does not currently possess these desires. Since I am not making the stronger assumption that all prudential reasons we have come from desire-satisfaction, I am not ruling out the existence of these reasons.⁴ In any case, the reason for acquiring these desires does not seem to be based on the value of their satisfaction. Instead, the objects of these desires might be intrinsically valuable and give us reasons to desire them, independent of whether these desires are satisfied or not. This is compatible with the prudential asymmetry, just as the procreative asymmetry is compatible with there being non-welfarist reasons to create people grounded in the intrinsic value of things like the continuation of human civilization.⁵ This also explains why our intuitions for the prudential asymmetry are strongest in cases where the objects of desire are not usually seen as intrinsically valuable.

Second, there might be prudential reasons to acquire new desires because they are instrumental to satisfying one's existing desires. For example, one might desire to become a

³ See Dietz (2023) for a recent discussion.

⁴ For defenses of the stronger thesis that all prudential reasons come from desire satisfaction, namely the desire-satisfaction theory of well-being, see Heathwood (2006, 2019), Sobel (2005), and Dorsey (2013). For hybrid theories of well-being that take desire-satisfaction to be one intrinsic good among others, see Arneson (1999), Keller (2009), and Lin (2016).

⁵ See Frick (2017) for a relevant discussion.

successful chef. One way to satisfy this desire might be to acquire another desire to learn about farming produce, so one can gain first-hand knowledge about the best seasonal produce in various regions. This is again compatible with the prudential asymmetry, since the reason for acquiring the desire to learn about farming does not come from its own satisfaction but from the satisfaction of the desire it is instrumental to, namely one's existing desire to become a chef. Analogously, the claim that we have moral reasons to create new happy lives, but purely for the sake of benefiting existing people, is compatible with the procreative asymmetry.

Third, one might suspect that the explanation for our intuition in Drug Addict is simply a hedonic one. Perhaps Mary's reason not to try the drug when there is no steady supply arises from the fact that frustrating the desire for it might bring her displeasure. On the other hand, she has no prudential reason to try the drug even with a steady supply, because acquiring a desire for it and satisfying the desire might not bring her any pleasure. But let's stipulate that this is not what is going on: suppose that Mary's unsatisfied desire for the drug would cause her no displeasure. It strikes me that she still has a reason not to acquire the desire. Some may reasonably disagree on this point. Some will argue that unsatisfied desires are necessarily unpleasant; others might say that if the unsatisfied desires are not unpleasant, then Mary has no reason to avoid acquiring them. For the purpose of this paper, I set those views aside. I think many will share the intuition that there is a non-hedonic version of the prudential asymmetry. This is the idea I will explore.⁶

⁶ Although I choose to formulate the prudential asymmetry in terms of on-and-off desires, I think it retains its plausibility when formulated in terms of finer-grained attitudes such as graded utility derived from one's preferences. However, formulating the prudential asymmetry in the framework of utility would be too complicated to discuss here in full. For one, it is unclear how talk of desires can be translated into talk of preferences and utility functions, specifically how *acquiring* a desire can be understood in those terms. But we might start with the rich literature on transformative experience. These are experiences that one goes through with their preferences genuinely altered or enriched. For example, consider Jackson (1982)'s Mary who is raised in a black-and-white room and has never seen colors. She cannot be said to have a preference for red apples over green apples

2.2 *The Epistemic Asymmetry*

Let us next consider the following case:

Bookstore: Jane walks into a bookstore and sees a book for sale called *Cloud Chronicles* by Arthur C., concerning only the topic of how much a cloud weighs, which she knows nothing about. She can either buy the book or not. Moreover, Jane knows that she is incredibly susceptible to the writings of Arthur C.: he writes clearly and well, presents seemingly convincing evidence, and tells vivid stories. She knows that if she reads the book, she will believe whatever he writes. The store owner, whom Jane knows to be a very trustworthy person who has read all the books he sells, might tell her one of two things: either the book is right or wrong about how much a cloud weighs. But Jane is also very forgetful and knows that whatever the owner tells her, she will forget in a week when she would have time to read the book, so she'll continue to find it convincing when she reads it. Should Jane buy the book?

Intuitively, if the store owner tells Jane that the book contains a falsehood, she has an epistemic reason not to buy the book. If she buys the book, she will predictably forget the owner's warning and come to believe the falsehood. Believing a falsehood alone is epistemically bad for her, and that gives Jane a reason not to buy the book. However, if the owner tells her that the book contains a truth, that alone does not seem to give her a reason to buy the book. Unless she already cares about how much a cloud weighs or the answer has some practical purpose for her, such as

based on how they look. But after she leaves the room and sees green and red apples, she undergoes a transformative experience and comes to prefer red apples to green apples. This is similar to acquiring a desire for the drug in *Drug Addict*. See Paul (2014), Pettigrew (2019) and Bykvist (2006, 2022) for further discussions of transformative experience and how to explain it in the frameworks of utility and well-being.

being featured in an upcoming exam, there does not seem to be any reason for her to acquire the true belief regarding the weight of a cloud. Cases like Bookstore support the following asymmetry:

Epistemic Asymmetry: one has epistemic reason not to acquire a belief in a proposition just because it is false, but one has no epistemic reason to acquire a belief in a proposition just because it is true.⁷

The epistemic asymmetry seems intuitive. Even if truth has epistemic value, it still seems like failing to acquire many true beliefs out there does not reflect negatively on one's belief state, whereas actively maintaining false beliefs does. If truth has any epistemic value, it seems to only give us reasons to revise our current false beliefs or form the true beliefs regarding propositions we already possess some doxastic attitudes about.

Similar to the first clarification we made for the prudential asymmetry, there could be epistemic reasons to acquire true beliefs in topics such as the true theory of everything and the most beautiful poetic form. However, the reasons for acquiring true beliefs concerning these topics are not grounded in their truth but in the objective value of these topics. Therefore, the existence of these reasons is consistent with the epistemic asymmetry. This also explains why our intuition for the epistemic asymmetry is strongest in cases involving trivial beliefs, such as the number of blades of grass on the lawn, because there are fewer confounding factors present.⁸

⁷ Nelson (2010) can be seen as an early defender of the epistemic asymmetry, even though he mainly focuses on the weaker claim that one has no epistemic *obligation* to believe.

⁸ Although the epistemic asymmetry is formulated in terms of on-and-off beliefs, I think it can also be formulated in finer-grained frameworks, such as that of credences and accuracy. Again, this discussion would take up too much space here. However, one difficulty worth mentioning is that the standard framework of credence functions usually assumes that they all share a fixed domain, so one cannot really 'acquire a new credence'. But this has been challenged on independent grounds by Carr (2015). Jackson (1982)'s Mary is again an excellent example, since she cannot be said to have credences regarding propositions about what colors look like. After seeing colors, she gains conceptual resources and 'acquires new credences' in propositions that require those resources to entertain. See Steele and Stefánsson (2021) for a more general discussion of awareness

3 Towards A Unified Approach

We have seen that there are plausible analogues of the procreative asymmetry in both the epistemic and prudential domains. In addition to the similarity of these asymmetries, these three domains are also closely related in that they all concern some kind of value and the reasons it gives us. It is thus possible that the procreative asymmetry, rather than revealing some specific insights concerning welfare or people, is an instance of a more fundamental asymmetry in our value-based reasons to promote value by adding (or not adding) additional value bearers like people, desires, and beliefs.⁹

In this paper, I will take a modest approach. I take the similarity of these asymmetries and the structural similarities of the three relevant domains of value to warrant an investigation into whether there can be a unified explanatory account. I am not assuming that an account that can only explain one of the asymmetries is implausible for that reason, and it is still an open possibility that each asymmetry has a different explanation. After all, sometimes structurally similar phenomena can have different explanations. However, there are many benefits to be reaped if a plausible unified account can be found. First, having one general account saves us the need to solve three problems with three separate accounts. Second, the fact that these asymmetries can be seen as instances of a more general asymmetry which can be explained by a unified account might

growth like this. A further difficulty worth mentioning here is that on some formal models of the accuracy of credal functions, such as the Brier score, it is impossible to increase accuracy and only possible to decrease inaccuracy. This is merely a formal concern, however, as models that rely on the Brier score assume that the credence functions being evaluated have a fixed domain. The fact that the Brier score might have implausible implications in variable domain cases, such as the implication that one would be better off having as few credences as possible, is reason to think that the model is unsuited for such cases. See Pettigrew (2018) and Talbot (2019) for discussion.

⁹ The observation that some insights in population ethics concern not people but the structure of value in general is not a new one. For example, as Pettigrew (2018) observes, the well-known aggregation problem in population ethics known as the Repugnant Conclusion is also a problem for accuracy epistemology.

reinforce the plausibility of each local asymmetry.¹⁰ Finally, a unified account can give us a new and interesting picture of how value gives us reasons that extends beyond these three applications. On this picture, we have reasons to promote value only by improving existing value bearers or not adding new value bearers that carry negative value. However, we have no reason to promote value by adding new value bearers that carry positive value.

I will mention two kinds of account that I will set aside here and why. The first kind of account is set aside because it is not meaningfully unified. Consider an account of the procreative asymmetry recently put forward by Frick (2020) that appeals to the intrinsic worth of human beings. Frick's account says that welfare matters only because people matter, and thus our reasons to promote welfare are bearer-regarding, meaning they are conditional on the existence of the people benefited. It makes a case for the idea that the proper response to welfare is not one of unrestricted promotion. Similarly, in the epistemic domain, Sylvan (2020) makes a case for the idea that the proper response to the value of truth is respect and not promotion. One might think that these accounts are the beginnings of a unified account, since they both argue that the proper response to a kind of value is not one of unrestricted promotion. However, the explanations they offer are limited to their own domains of value. A person might matter because they have rights or dignity, but it is nonsensical to say that a desire or a belief can have these properties. Similarly, Sylvan's argument relies on his account meeting desiderata specific to epistemology, such as being able to explain the importance of reliability in epistemic justification, which have no ethical analogues. A unified account, on the other hand, will have to provide a unified explanation for why our reasons to promote these values share an asymmetric structure.

¹⁰ For skepticism towards the procreative asymmetry, see Chappell (2017) and Spears (2020). Some also reject the procreative asymmetry in favor of a weaker asymmetry of benefits and harms, such as Harman (2004), but I will not discuss them here.

The second kind of account is set aside because the explanation it might offer is only contingent. An example is the natural idea that the procreative asymmetry can be explained by the observation that procreation is very burdensome, and having a reason to create every happy life one could is too demanding.¹¹ Having reasons not to create miserable lives, on the other hand, is not burdensome at all. Call this the demandingness account. It seems like the account can offer a meaningfully unified explanation of the epistemic and prudential asymmetries, if having reasons to acquire numerous beliefs and desires is also similarly burdensome. However, even if the claim of burdensomeness is true, it is at best contingently true. For example, benefiting existing people can sometimes be just as burdensome as creating new lives, if not more. How burdensome it is to acquire beliefs and desires can also be contingent on one's psychology, one's own willingness to push limits, and even the right theory of belief and desire ascriptions (for on some theories we already have infinitely many beliefs and desires).

4 A Unified Account

In this section, I provide a working model of a unified account. The account has two components: an axiology with a certain structure that allows for more than one betterness relation to inform our decisions, and a principle regarding our value-based reasons given such an axiology. For this paper, I will use axiological actualism as the first component to illustrate the account since it is simple, familiar in the literature, and has the right axiological structure. As I will note later, the general account does not ultimately require axiological actualism. The main focus will be on the second component.

¹¹ For discussion of this point, see Chappell (2017).

4.1 Axiological Actualism

Axiological actualism, or actualism for short, is the idea that an outcome is better than another only if it is better for actual people. It seems attractive because it follows from two other plausible ideas, namely metaphysical actualism and the person-affecting restriction.¹² The latter says that an outcome is better than another only if it is better for someone, and the former says that only actual people exist.

Let us see actualism in action and examine what it says about the decisions relevant for the procreative asymmetry. Consider the following outcomes:

	Abed	Bing
Sparse	100	/
Happy	100	100
Misery	100	-100

According to actualism, how these outcomes are compared depends on which outcome is actual. If Sparse is the actual outcome and Bing does not actually exist, how she hypothetically fares in the outcomes of Happy and Misery is not taken into account. Therefore, all three outcomes would be equally good if Sparse is actual, since they are all equally good for Abed, the only actual person.

On the other hand, if either Happy or Misery is actual, how things are for Bing does matter since she actually exists. For one, Misery is worse than Happy regardless of which of the two outcomes is actual. The question is whether Happy is better than Sparse and whether Misery is worse than Sparse, if either Happy or Misery is actual. This depends on whether existence can be

¹² I owe this presentation of actualism to Hare (2007). See Parsons (2002) for another helpful discussion of actualism.

better or worse for Bing than non-existence. Here, following many actualists, I assume the following view, although it is somewhat controversial:

Existence Comparativism: existence can be better or worse than non-existence for someone if they actually exist.¹³

Existence Comparativism says that if either Happy or Misery is actual and thus Bing actually exists, existence can be better or worse for her than non-existence. If Sparse is actual, however, Bing does not actually exist and thus existence cannot be better or worse for her. Given Existence Comparativism and actualism, we can conclude that if either Happy or Misery is actual, Happy is better than Sparse which is better than Misery.

Can actualism help us explain the procreative asymmetry? This depends on what deontic principle we adopt, since actualism itself only concerns the betterness of outcomes. For illustration, let us consider a simple consequentialist principle:

Maximizing: one has a reason not to perform an action if there is a better alternative available.

Call the combination of actualism and Maximizing *simple actualism*. As it stands, simple actualism cannot satisfactorily explain the asymmetry. Recall that the procreative asymmetry contains a positive component (one has a moral reason not to create a miserable life) and a negative component (one does not have a moral reason to create a happy life). Simple actualism only affirms the positive component if a miserable life is actually created: if a miserable life is not actually created, creating it is not worse than not creating it, and thus one does not have a reason not to

¹³ This view is most directly discussed by Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2015), but it is controversial. For criticisms, see Parfit (1984), Broome (1999, 2004), and Bykvist (2007a, 2015). In its favor, see Greaves and Cusbert (2022) for a discussion of why an important argument against it, the metaphysical argument, might fail. Also see Holtug (2001), Roberts (2003), Adler (2009), and Fleurbaey and Voorhoeve (2015) for defenses of comparativism in general.

create it. Similarly, it only affirms the negative component if a happy life is not actually created: if a happy life is actually created, creating it is better than creating it, and thus one does have a reason to create it. As it stands, simple actualism only captures half of each conjunct of the procreative asymmetry.

Moreover, simple actualism is known to have many problems.¹⁴ An important problem is that it violates the following principle:

Reasons Invariance: whether one has reason to perform an act does not depend on whether it is performed.

Reasons Invariance seems plausible. Imagine someone is deliberating about which act to perform. Naturally, they need to think about what reasons they have for each act. But if Reasons Invariance fails, they need to predict which act they will perform before they consider what reasons they have for it. This seems to defeat the point of deliberation, where one considers one's reasons before arriving at the act one will perform.

Simple actualism violates Reasons Invariance because it implies that if one does not create a happy life, one has no reason to create it, yet if one does create a happy life, one has a reason to create it. Worse still, simple actualism implies that if one does not create a miserable life, one has no reason not to create it, yet if one does create a miserable life, one has a reason not to create it. It seems like deliberating about procreative decisions is pointless and intractable given simple

¹⁴ For criticisms of simple actualism, see Bykvist (2007b) and Hare (2007). These include but are not limited to: actualism violates invariance principles, actualism is counterintuitive, and that actualism conflicts with the non-identity intuition. For what it is worth, the final version of actualism I propose also gets around some of these problems, and since my general unified account can ultimately do away with actualism, I set aside most of these criticisms and focus on the violation of Reasons Invariance which is the most relevant one here.

actualism. This problem, along with many others, has led recent proponents of actualism, such as Cohen (2020) and Spencer (2021), to adopt more sophisticated versions of it.

4.2 *The Foreseen Value Asymmetry*

The reason simple actualism fails to capture the procreative asymmetry is its commitment to Maximizing. For actualism to work as the basis of an account of the procreative asymmetry, we need a more sophisticated deontic principle.¹⁵ This is partly because actualism is a view on which value facts depend on who the value-bearers are. When some acts can change who the value-bearers are, what *would* be better if one were to perform an act comes apart from what *is* better. To avoid problems like violating Reasons Invariance, a more stable deontic principle should be chosen regarding acts that are not better or worse to perform, but *would* be better or worse if they were performed.

I propose an intuitive deontic principle that, combined with actualism, gives us the procreative asymmetry:

Foreseen Value Asymmetry: the fact that it *would* be worse if one were to ϕ does give one reason not to ϕ , even if it *is* not worse for one to ϕ ; however, if it *is* not better for one to ϕ , the fact that it *would* be better if one were to ϕ does not give one reason to ϕ .

I'll have more to say in defense of the principle later. Here, let me try to get the intuition across. If what is better to do does not depend on what actually happens, then in choosing between the better of two alternatives, one avoids choosing the worse option. However, if betterness is contingent,

¹⁵ Here I follow Spencer (2021) and Cohen (2020). However, the principle I propose is different from theirs, although in the same spirit.

doing what is better and not doing what is worse can come apart. When they do come apart, doing something that is worse still seems wrong. On the other hand, failing to do something that *would* have been good, while the failure is not actually bad, does not seem wrong. In other words, we seem to want to avoid choosing the worse option regardless of whether it is actually worse or it would have been worse if we were to do it. But we do not seem to have anything against failing to do something that *would* have been good, if that does not lead to doing something worse.

For clarity, let us formulate the implications of the Foreseen Value Asymmetry in more precise terms. For any act X , let W_x be the outcome where X is performed for any act X . Let ' $X > Y$ ' be the relation that the outcome of X is better than the outcome of Y . The Foreseen Value Asymmetry says that, for two alternatives A and B , if they exhibit the following axiological structure:

At W_A , $B > A$

At W_B , $B \not> A$ and $A \not> B$ ¹⁶

one has a reason not to perform A . On the other hand, in the following case:

At W_A , $A > B$

At W_B , $A \not> B$ and $B \not> A$

one has no reason to perform A .

Given actualism, the Foreseen Value Asymmetry implies the procreative asymmetry, since actualism exhibits the aforementioned axiological structure. In the outcome where a happy life is created, creating it is better than not creating it. However, in the outcome where a miserable life is

¹⁶ Here we have stipulated that B is not worse than A at W_B . An alternative possibility is that B is also worse than A at W_B , in which case the Foreseen Value Asymmetry would give conflicting reasons. More would need to be said regarding how these reasons are weighed against each other, but we do not need to discuss this here.

created, creating it is worse than not creating it. If no life is created, it is neither better nor worse to create a happy or miserable life. Given these outcomes and rankings, the Foreseen Value Asymmetry says merely foreseeing that one would make things better if one were to create a happy life is not enough to generate a reason for one to do so, since it is not actually better for one to create it. In the case where one can benefit an existing person, one has a reason to do it because it *is* actually better to benefit them. On the other hand, merely foreseeing that one would make things worse if one were to create a miserable life is enough for one to have a reason not to create it.

Unlike Maximizing, the Foreseen Value Asymmetry harmonizes Reasons Invariance with the contingent value facts of actualism. Let us call this combination of actualism and the Foreseen Value Asymmetry *sophisticated actualism*. Unlike simple actualism, sophisticated actualism does not imply any variance in reasons. In the procreative decisions mentioned above, regardless of whether a happy life is actually created, sophisticated actualism implies that one has no reason to create it. Similarly, regardless of whether a miserable life is actually created, sophisticated actualism implies that one has a reason not to create it.

One might still object to sophisticated actualism on the grounds that it inherits the variance in axiological facts from actualism. This, however, is less problematic if one can maintain Reasons Invariance. A view that entails only axiological variance but maintains Reasons Invariance is less objectionable since it does not lead to problems in deliberation. Moreover, the variance in axiological facts might still serve other explanatory purposes. In particular, it helps provide a good account of our gladness and regret attitudes in procreative cases.¹⁷ While we have no reason to create a life just because it is happy, if an existing life is a happy one, we can reasonably be glad that the life is created. The reasonableness of this attitude of gladness seems hard to explain if we

¹⁷ See Dreier (2018) for a discussion of this point.

think creating the life is not better in some way. In particular, this might be tricky for accounts of the asymmetry that maintain there is no welfarist reason to create a happy life and it is not better to create it. Since sophisticated actualism allows for axiological variance, it can explain why it is reasonable to be glad that a happy life is created but also reasonable not to regret a happy life not being created.¹⁸

4.3 Explaining the Epistemic and Prudential Asymmetries

We have seen how the Foreseen Value Asymmetry, combined with actualism, can explain the procreative asymmetry. Next, let us see how it can help us account for the other two asymmetries. Since the Foreseen Value Asymmetry itself is a principle about how value in general informs our reasons in cases where value is contingent on our actions, all we need to do is to find views about epistemic value and prudential value that have the same axiological structure as actualism.

In the prudential domain, probing our intuition for the prudential asymmetry already suggests something promising. For example, consider the desire to excel in wine-tasting and become a sommelier. Part of why it seems implausible to claim that I have a prudential reason to get into wine-tasting just because I can do it well is that unless I am already into wine-tasting, it does not matter to me that I can be good at it. This suggests the following view:

Prudential Actualism: insofar as desire-satisfaction contributes to one's prudential well-being, an agent is prudentially better off only to the extent that their actual desires are satisfied.

¹⁸ This is compatible with there being other non-welfarist reasons to be glad of the creation of a life. See Harman (2009) and Setiya (2014) for discussion. For example, one can reasonably regret the suffering of a miserable person one creates but also be glad that they are created due to attachments one can form with the person.

Prudential actualism aligns with the roughly Humean idea that whether an act is prudentially good should be evaluated in an agent's own light, and that prudence is about evaluating what options best satisfy the desires an agent actually has. It also follows from what is known as the resonance constraint. As Railton puts it, 'what is intrinsically valuable for a person must have a connection with what he would find in some degree compelling or attractive, at least if he were rational and aware. It would be an intolerably alienated conception of someone's good to imagine that it might fail in any such way to engage him'.¹⁹ For our purposes, it suffices to point out that what one does not actually desire is something one does not currently resonate with, for otherwise one would count as already possessing some desire-like attitudes towards it.²⁰ Not becoming a sommelier, even though I would have done well as one, cannot be prudentially bad for me since it is not something I actually desire and resonate with. Since prudential actualism is just the prudential analogue of actualism and shares the same axiological structure, when combined with the Foreseen Value Asymmetry, it can explain the prudential asymmetry.

Similar to how actualism can explain the gladness and regret attitudes concerning procreative decisions with its axiological variance, prudential actualism can do the same for similar attitudes about certain prudential cases. This is especially salient in cases in which the agent goes through a transformative experience, undergoing a transformation with their values and desires

¹⁹ See Railton (1986, p.9). For recent discussions of this constraint, see Dorsey (2017), Heathwood (2019), and Fanciullo (forthcoming).

²⁰ We also need to suppose that the desires one does actually have are desires one resonates with. Granted, one can be said to possess desires one does not resonate with, if we count addictions, compulsions and other cases of akrasia as genuine desires. But we do not have to, and even if we do, we can modify prudential actualism to exclude these desires as contributors to one's prudential well-being. This still allows the prudential asymmetry to hold for the desires we want to account for.

genuinely changed.²¹ For example, suppose I used to only care about the simple things in life and did not care about wine-tasting. However, time has changed me dramatically such that I acquired a new desire to become a sommelier. Before I undergo this transformation, being good or bad at wine-tasting is neither better nor worse for me, since I do not care about it and lack the conceptual resources to evaluate it. I do not know what it is like to taste the finer differences between different wines and to live as a sommelier. After acquiring the desire for wine-tasting and satisfying it, however, I might very well be glad that I did. But this does not mean that I had a prudential reason to get into wine-tasting beforehand when the desire did not resonate with me.²²

The story about how the Foreseen Value Asymmetry helps us capture the epistemic asymmetry is similar. Consider the following view about epistemic value:

Epistemic Actualism: insofar as true beliefs contribute to the value of one's epistemic state, an agent is epistemically better off only to the extent that their actual beliefs are true.

Essentially, epistemic actualism says that if I do not actually have a doxastic attitude towards a proposition, the truth or falsehood of that proposition simply does not figure into the evaluation of my belief state. In other words, one is neither negatively nor positively evaluated based on the true or false propositions they do not or cannot think of. For all the propositions an agent has doxastic attitudes for, evaluating the agent epistemically based on those attitudes is fair game. However, for propositions an agent is unaware of or has no conceptual resources to entertain, it seems implausible to evaluate the agent's epistemic state based on them. Since epistemic actualism is just

²¹ Note that the talk of desires is not standardly used in the literature of transformative experience, as the main focus is usually on utility and decision theory. But this does not mean that transformative experience cannot be understood in terms of desires. Moreover, we might be able to formulate the prudential asymmetry in terms of utility, as I gestured towards in footnote 6.

²² See Pettigrew (2019) for a relevant discussion of this point.

the epistemic analogue of actualism, it implies the epistemic asymmetry when combined with the Foreseen Value Asymmetry.

4.4 An Argument for the Foreseen Value Asymmetry

We have seen that the Foreseen Value Asymmetry, paired with actualism and its prudential and epistemic analogues, can give us the three asymmetries. It can also help us maintain Reasons Invariance and offer an account of our gladness and regret attitudes regarding procreative decisions and transformative experiences. Its fruitfulness and explanatory power already count in its favor, even if we could offer no deeper support for it. Other things being equal, positing one fundamental asymmetry that explains three asymmetries seems preferable to positing three separate fundamental asymmetries.²³ But more would be nice. Here, I take a tentative step further and offer an argument for the Foreseen Value Asymmetry.

If we perform an act that we have reasons against, we can be held accountable for it and perhaps even be blamed for it. Similarly, we can sometimes be praised for choosing to perform the act we have most reason to perform. However, if value is contingent (for example, as actualism would imply), we have a surprising amount of power over normative reality. We can make outcomes better that otherwise would have been neutral. Can we also thereby generate reasons for our own actions? It seems odd if we have the power to create reasons for the actions we want to perform. We might, so to speak, perform an action first and then generate reasons that justify it afterwards. Being able to create reasons this way seems like the reasons equivalent of money

²³ This is made more attractive by the increasing frustration many have with the procreative asymmetry that one has to appeal to some other asymmetry to explain it. See Cohen (2020) for a good discussion of this point. If the same is true of the prudential and epistemic asymmetries, that no reductive accounts exist, then it would certainly be more theoretically fruitful if we can explain all three (and maybe more) by appealing to one single asymmetry.

laundering. One should not be able to legitimize one's actions by simply bootstrapping reasons into existence.

On the other hand, it seems perfectly fine if we allow people to create reasons not to perform acts. In particular, it might even seem desirable that one create reasons against acts that would make things worse if performed. Unlike self-justifying reasons, reasons against performing acts that exist only if said acts are performed are self-undermining. It does not seem illegitimate for someone to have the normative power to create reasons against the actions that would give them self-undermining reasons. For an analogy, in considering which powers to give a government agency, it seems ill-advised to give it the power to permit its own activities, especially if the justifications can only be found after the fact. On the other hand, it seems salubrious to give the agency the power to limit its own activities, be it whether these activities do make things worse or would make things worse if carried out.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I presented plausible analogues of the procreative asymmetry in the prudential and epistemic domains. I then discussed a unified account of the three asymmetries. This account appeals to a principle I called the Foreseen Value Asymmetry, and it can help us explain the asymmetries given certain axiologies with a distinct kind of structure, such as actualism and its prudential and epistemic analogues.

The broader lesson of the paper, however, is not that actualism and its analogues are the key for a unified account of the asymmetries. I do not think they are. The lesson is that explaining the asymmetries might require rejecting the standard picture that many ethicists assume, where a single betterness overall relation guides our actions with the help of simple deontic principles like

Maximizing. What the combination of the Foreseen Value Asymmetry and actualism helps demonstrate is that when we move away from the standard picture, we open up the possibility for more interesting views about how value informs reason. Actualism works because in a way, it rejects the standard picture in favor of many “betterness-at-worlds” relations, allowing each relation to rank all outcomes differently.²⁴ When many betterness relations are at play, we can move away from simple deontic principles like Maximizing. Instead, we can adopt interesting deontic principles like the Foreseen Value Asymmetry that give us different verdicts depending on whether the relevant betterness relations agree or disagree on the ranking of outcomes. This also helps us see that actualism is not essential, for as long as we have an axiology that appeals to different betterness relations that rank the relevant outcomes differently in the ways needed for Foreseen Value Asymmetry to work, we can offer a unified explanation of the asymmetries.

²⁴ One might argue that actualism is a view on which there is only one betterness relation; it just says that how the relation ranks outcomes is contingent. I also use the language of contingency earlier in the paper for familiarity. However, this distinction does not matter for our purposes. Actualism still appeals to different rankings at different worlds, going against the standard picture where the ranking remains invariant across worlds. It is this structural feature and how it allows actualism to inform reason in novel ways that I’m interested in here.

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