

## Incommensurability, Conditional Value, and the Procreation Asymmetry

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Abstract:

A popular view in population ethics is the procreation asymmetry, according to which we have strong reasons not to bring a miserable life into existence but no reason to bring a good life into existence. Several philosophers have recently defended this asymmetry by arguing for incommensurability between a good life and nonexistence, on the grounds that the values of positive welfare goods are conditional on the existence of the person who receives them. In this paper I present an argument against incommensurability between good lives and nonexistence, show how an appeal to conditional intrinsic value can avoid that argument, and present a problem for that solution.

Keywords: procreation asymmetry; intrinsic value; population ethics; incommensurability

### 1. Introduction

The procreation asymmetry is the combination of the following judgments: (i) we have strong reason not to create someone with a miserable life; (ii) we have no reason to create someone with a happy life (Narveson 1973, Benatar 2006, Rabinowicz 2009, Roberts 2011, Frick 2017, Earl 2017, Nebel 2019, Bader 2022, Draper 2023). The asymmetry is sometimes justified on the basis of an axiological asymmetry: (i) bringing a miserable life into existence is a bad thing, and (ii) bringing a good life into existence is not a good thing. Recently several philosophers have defended this axiological asymmetry by appealing to *conditional value* (Benatar 2013, Frick 2017, Nebel 2019, Draper 2023). In what follows I present an argument against the axiological asymmetry, show how conditional value can help avoid that argument, and raise a problem for that solution.

## 2. Intrinsic Value and the Independence of Pain and Pleasure

Let us begin with a brief argument given by David Benatar (2006: 42; 2013: 137). Compare the lives of two people, S and H. S constantly gets sick but has the capacity to recover quickly, while H never gets sick and lacks that capacity. The capacity to recover quickly benefits S, but cannot make S's life better than H's life. The analogy is supposed to work like this: the capacity to recover quickly is analogous to pleasure, and getting sick is analogous to pain. Just as the capacity to recover cannot make S's life better than H's, pleasure cannot make a life with pain in it better than no life at all. At best, pleasure can compensate for the badness of pain. So a life with pleasure and pain in it cannot be better than nonexistence, no matter how much pleasure it contains.<sup>1</sup>

The analogy fails. In the example of S and H, it is true that the capacity to recover cannot make S's life better than H's life. The capacity to recover has no intrinsic value. Its value merely consists in getting rid of the sickness. For the analogy to work, we would have to think of pleasure as having value merely in getting rid of pain, so that its positive value could never exceed the negative value of what it takes away, just as no combination of sickness and recuperative ability can be better than the absence of both. But pleasure and pain are *independently valuable or disvaluable* features of a life. The value of pleasure does not depend on the presence of pain. Thus Benatar's analogy gives us no reason to think that pleasure cannot outweigh pain, nor to think that a combination of pleasure and pain cannot turn out to be a net benefit. Benatar considers a similar response to his argument, but says it can be countered by making use of what seems to be a conditional value view of the sort I discuss in §4 below: 'what is intrinsically good for people is... that if there are people, they have pleasure' (2013: 138). We shall see that this claim can indeed be used to defend the asymmetry. But it provides no defence of Benatar's analogical argument. The capacity to recover does not have any intrinsic value, whether conditional or unconditional.

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<sup>1</sup> Here and throughout I follow Benatar and others in understanding these value claims as concerning the personal value of well-being, rather than impersonal value, and I follow Draper in understanding this personal value to be 'the sort of value that the benevolent individual finds in well-being' (Draper 2023: 247n6).

The procreation asymmetry is supposed to be compatible with the possibility of an intrinsically good life. So the challenge for the asymmetry defender is to explain how the existence of intrinsic welfare goods that are independent of intrinsic welfare bads is compatible with the claim that a bringing a good life into existence is not a good thing.

### 3. An Argument against Asymmetric Incommensurability

It would be contradictory to say that something is intrinsically good (such as a good life), but *equal* in value to something that is not intrinsically good (such as nonexistence). But there is another option: they could be *incommensurable*.<sup>2</sup> On this version of the asymmetry, a good life is incommensurable with nonexistence, but a bad life is worse than nonexistence.<sup>3</sup> This is the view described by Broome (2005: 407–8), and rejected by him but often defended by others: adding someone to a population whose life is in the ‘neutral’ range does not make that population better or worse, nor does it leave the population with the same value; the two populations are incommensurable. But adding someone with a bad life would make the population worse.<sup>4</sup>

Here is an argument against asymmetric incommensurability.<sup>5</sup> First, compare a bad life with a neutral (zero-value) life. Surely the bad life is worse. Furthermore, it is worse *by some amount*. The worse the life is, the more it is worse than a neutral life. Second, compare a bad life

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<sup>2</sup> I will not make heavy weather over the distinction between incommensurability and incomparability in this paper. See Chang 1997 for discussions of the difference.

<sup>3</sup> Defenders of this view include Rabinowicz (2009), Frick (2017), and Nebel (2019). Nebel calls this view ‘asymmetric comparativism’ (2019: 127). Bader (2022) defends complete or symmetric incommensurability, which avoids the argument I give here, but at the expense of having the implication that adding terrible lives to a population does not make it worse. Bader argues that there are nevertheless reasons against creating bad lives.

<sup>4</sup> Broome argues that this view makes neutrality implausibly ‘greedy’ (2005: 408–9). This argument has been rejected by, for example, Wlodek Rabinowicz (2009: 398–99) and Johann Frick (2017: 354–57). Jacob Nebel (2019: 139) shows (while not responding specifically to Broome) that the ‘pseudodominance principle’ employed by Broome results in transitivity violations. The argument I give here is entirely different from Broome’s.

<sup>5</sup> The argument I give here bears some similarity to one given by Alastair Norcross (2020: 371–2), especially my premiss (3); but there are important differences. First, Norcross’s argument concerns incomparability more broadly, while my argument concerns only the procreation asymmetry; my argument requires the specific claims endorsed by asymmetry defenders in order to go through. Second, Norcross’s argument requires a principle of minimal betterness, which my argument does not.

with nonexistence. The asymmetry tells us that a bad life is worse than nonexistence. It seems plausible that it is worse than nonexistence by some amount. The worse a life is, the greater the amount to which it is worse than nonexistence (and hence the greater the reason against creating it). I propose that any given bad life is worse than a neutral life *by the same amount* that it is worse than nonexistence.<sup>6</sup> The following principle seems obvious: if  $x$  is worse than  $y$  by some amount, and  $x$  is worse than  $z$  by the same amount, then  $y$  and  $z$  are equal in value. It follows, then, that the neutral life is equal in value to nonexistence. Finally, compare a good life with a neutral life. Clearly, the good life is better. But if a neutral life is equal in value to nonexistence, then it seems that the good life must also be better than nonexistence. This follows from another obvious principle: if  $x$  is better than  $y$ , and  $y$  is equal in value to  $z$ , then  $x$  is better than  $z$ . But this means that the alleged asymmetric incommensurability has failed, and the second half of the asymmetry is false. In summary:

- (1)  $V(\text{neutral life}) - V(\text{miserable life}) = n$ .
- (2)  $V(\text{nonexistence}) - V(\text{miserable life}) = n$ .
- (3) If  $V(y) - V(x) = n$  and  $V(z) - V(x) = n$ , then  $V(y) = V(z)$ .
- (4) Therefore,  $V(\text{neutral life}) = V(\text{nonexistence})$ . (1,2,3)
- (5)  $V(\text{good life}) > V(\text{neutral life})$ .
- (6) If  $V(x) > V(y)$ , and  $V(y) = V(z)$ , then  $V(x) > V(z)$ .
- (7) Therefore,  $V(\text{good life}) > V(\text{nonexistence})$ . (4,5,6)
- (8) Therefore, the asymmetry is false.

This argument shows that if we are to defend the axiological asymmetry, we must open our minds to more complicated axiological views, to which I turn next.

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<sup>6</sup> This assumption is not essential; one might say that the difference between a miserable life and nonexistence is either greater or smaller than the difference between a miserable life and a neutral life. The argument would still go through given this assumption, but would be a little more complicated; I leave it to the reader to make the relevant changes.

#### 4. Conditional Intrinsic Value

A popular way to explain the incommensurability of a good life with nonexistence is by appealing to conditional intrinsic value (Benatar 2013, Frick 2017, Nebel 2019, Draper 2023). If we do this, we have a way to respond to the argument I just gave, though new problems emerge.

According to the conditional value view, the values of the good components of life are conditional in a way that precludes the result that getting those things is better than not existing. In particular, some philosophers have argued that positive well-being is valuable only on the condition that its recipient exists (Benatar 2013: 138; Frick 2017: 352; Nebel 2019: 136; Draper 2023: 250). An upshot of this claim is supposed to be that if we compare a universe where someone exists and gets some pleasure with a universe where that person never exists, the universe with the pleasure isn't better; the worlds are incommensurable. However, if we compare two universes where someone exists, getting pleasure in one but not the other, the one where they get pleasure is better. Pain, on the other hand, has unconditional value; adding some pain to the universe makes it worse whether bringing the pain into existence involves bringing a new person into existence or just inflicting pain on an already-existing person.

This view is motivated in different ways. Frick motivates it by an analogy to promise-keeping, and an appeal to the unconditional value of human persons; we care about welfare because we care about the people who get it, not vice versa (Frick 2017: 351–2; Frick 2020: 65–69). Nebel motivates it by an appeal to conditional desire (Nebel 2019: 130–31). I won't address these motivations here (see Aaron 2022 for critical discussion of Frick's view). I intend merely to focus on the following combination of claims: (i) that the value of positive welfare is conditional on the existence of the individual that gets it; (ii) that bringing someone into existence with positive welfare is not better than not bringing them into existence at all, nor it is worse; rather the two outcomes are incommensurable; (iii) that bringing someone into existence with negative welfare is worse than nonexistence.

A question arises: what exactly are we saying when we say that a kind of value is *conditional*? Consider another way in which pleasure is sometimes taken to have conditional

value: we might think pleasure is good only when it is taken in something good, or when its recipient is deserving (see e.g. Olson 2004 and Lemos 2023). In these cases, the pleasure can exist without the condition. The value of a pleasant experience depends on the obtaining of some other thing; in some circumstances the pleasure has one value, and in others that very pleasure has a different value. But obviously this cannot be the case if pleasure's value is conditional on *the existence of its recipient*. In this case we cannot compare two worlds containing this pleasure, one with its recipient and one without. The conditional 'x is good only if the conditions that make x's existence possible obtain' is true for all x. We cannot distinguish the value of pleasure from the values of other things, or from the disvalue of pain, by appealing to such conditionals. So a challenge for the conditional value view is to say something about what it means, in the context of the procreation asymmetry, to say that a kind of intrinsic value is conditional.

## 5. Conditional Value as Standard-Relative Value

We can explain the conditionality of intrinsic value, and avoid the argument of §3, if we introduce some axiological shiftiness. In fact, this is what both Frick and Draper do: they introduce the idea of values or reasons being *relative to a standard of evaluation* (Draper 2002: 210; Draper 2023: 251; Frick 2020: 69–73). The asymmetry-friendly idea is that if we are in a world where someone has not been brought into existence, and might never be, it is optional whether to put ourselves under a standard whereby that person's welfare constrains our decision-making. But once the person does exist, or once it is determined that the person will exist, we no longer have that option.

Let us introduce the notion of 'standard-relative intrinsic value.' The idea is that each purportedly valuable thing has, rather than an absolute intrinsic value, a value relative to a standard. For each actual or possible person, there is a standard of evaluation on the assumption that the person exists, and a different standard on the assumption that the person does not and never will exist. This would allow us to say that according to one standard (where the person exists), the person's pleasure is intrinsically good, but according to another standard (where they don't exist), their pleasure is not intrinsically good.

Standard-relative value would help avoid my argument against asymmetric incommensurability. P's pleasure has a value *relative to the P-exists-standard* of  $n$  ( $n > 0$ ). It has a value *relative to the P-does-not-exist standard* of zero (or perhaps an undefined value). These values,  $n$  and zero, are 'incommensurable' just in the sense that they lie on different value scales, and there is no overarching scale to commensurate the scales. They are incommensurable in the way that, say, height and weight are incommensurable size values; there is no meaningful notion of size according to which something that weighs 101 kg is 'bigger' than something that occupies 100 cubic centimeters. Within any particular value scale there is no incommensurability, and thus we get no contradictions (premiss (5) of my argument is false given the nonexistence standard).

We can use the idea of standard-relative value to understand what is being said by defenders of the asymmetry who claim that the value of pleasure is conditional. Conditionality is not a matter of having different values in different circumstances, as when pleasure has more value when taking in something good; rather, it is a matter of having different values relative to different standards. To say that something's value is unconditional, on this view, is to say that it has the same value relative to every standard; for example, pain has unconditional negative value. Applied to the asymmetry, the idea would be that when we say that a good life is not better than never existing, we have in mind a claim about value relative to the nonexistence standard, not to the existence standard. When we say that a bad life is worse than never existing, we could be making a claim about value relative to any standard, because the disvalue of the bad life is unconditional.

In cases where someone is deciding whether to procreate, multiple standards of value are applicable. The applicable standards would be all the standards that could apply given the alternatives available at the time of choice (Draper 2023: 252). If someone would exist if I choose one option, but not if I choose another, there are two applicable standards. Let's say that one outcome is unconditionally better than another iff it is better on every applicable standard; it is conditionally better iff it is better on some but not all applicable standards. So a miserable life would be unconditionally worse than nonexistence, but a good life would be only conditionally

better than nonexistence. We may then define deontic notions in terms of unconditional betterness as follows: it is permissible to choose an option iff no alternative is unconditionally better than it; it is obligatory to choose an option iff it is unconditionally better than every alternative; it is wrong to choose an option iff some alternative is unconditionally better than it. Thus, it is permissible to choose to create a happy life or not to create it, but it is not permissible to choose to create a miserable life. Or, to put things in terms of reasons: there is reason to prefer or choose an option that is unconditionally better, but no reason to prefer or choose an option that is not unconditionally better.

## 6. Against the Standard of Nonexistence

I've tried to show that there is a way to understand the conditional value view that avoids contradiction. But all is not well. The problem involves mixed lives: lives that have some good components and some bad ones. On the conditional value view, the bad components of a life make it worse than nonexistence, but the good components fail to make it better than nonexistence. We might worry that given these facts, *every* mixed life will be worse than nonexistence; thus we will be pushed towards antinatalism. After all, every mixed life is worse than nonexistence in one respect and not better in any respect. That combination would seem to add up to a mixed life being worse than nonexistence overall (Broome 2005: 409; but see Nebel 2019: 139).

But the conditional value view as understood here does not have this implication. It is true that *on the standard of nonexistence*, all mixed lives are worse than nonexistence. But on the standard of existence, some mixed lives are better than nonexistence. As I am interpreting the conditional value view, these two standards are incommensurable; there is no overarching standard that subsumes both standards. We are not thereby driven to antinatalism.

A question arises, however, about these standards. The existence standard works the way we would normally think. Intrinsic goods move a life up on the scale; intrinsic bads move the life down; this is true no matter where a life is situated on the scale. A very good life is made better on the existence scale by the addition of more goods. The nonexistence scale works

differently. Since mixed lives must be worse than nonexistence on this scale, it seems that on this scale, there is *no such thing as a good life*; there are only bad lives and neutral lives.

There are two ways we can generate a value scale with this implication. One is suggested by Draper:

But judged by the standards that would apply should Jane never exist, Jane's pleasure has no value and, therefore, because her pain would still have disvalue, [nonexistence] is better than [a happy life for Jane]. (Draper 2023: 252)

Draper's suggestion amounts to the view that on the nonexistence scale, there is no such thing as intrinsic goodness. It is simply a badness scale. If hedonism is true, then on the nonexistence scale we just add up the amount of pain in a life and ignore pleasure altogether. But this is not the way we typically evaluate lives, even in cases where we know that the individual will never exist. Suppose we are considering the lives of two merely possible people, A and B, who might have existed but definitely will not. The relevant standard of evaluation for such lives should be the standard of nonexistence; the standard of existence would not apply. Suppose A's life contains 50 hedons and 10 dolors, while B's life contains no hedons and 5 dolors. According to the nonexistence scale as understood by Draper, B has the better life. I submit that nobody would evaluate these lives in this way. Of course, there is still another standard, the existence standard, that yields the more intuitive evaluation of these lives. But on Draper's view, that standard is inapplicable since these lives never exist. This is what allows the view to yield the results Draper desires in other cases; for example, Draper says 'it makes no sense to regret not having a happy child because, given that the child never exists, the happiness they might have enjoyed has no value' (Draper 2023: 254).

Another way to generate the scale would be to say that on the nonexistence scale, intrinsic goods are merely *compensatory* or canceling (McMahan 2009: 54). Adding some intrinsic goods to a life makes it better as long as the life contains some intrinsic bads that need to be counterbalanced; but once that has been accomplished, adding further intrinsic goods to the life doesn't improve it. If hedonism is true, pleasure makes a painful life better, but it doesn't make

a neutral life better. On this way of thinking about things, A's life is better than B's (though not by nearly as much as on the existence scale).

But this is to admit failure in meeting the challenge posed at the end of §2; it is once again to deny, at least when evaluating lives that will never exist, that the intrinsic values of pleasure and pain are independent. That was the problem that sank Benatar's argument. If we have good reason to reject Benatar's argument because it wrongly denies that the values of pleasure and pain are independent of each other, then we have just as much reason to reject the ranking of lives yielded by the nonexistence standard.<sup>7</sup>

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