The Problem with Evaluating the Comparative Prudential Value of Procreation Asymmetrically

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Abstract

It is widely held that there is a fundamental asymmetry in the ethics of procreation: We are obliged not to create unhappy people, but we are not obliged to create happy people. I argue that, contrary to a thesis popularized by David Benatar, this cannot be explained by appeal to an *axiological* asymmetry in comparative prudential value. All natural ways to spell out the metaphysical foundations of an asymmetric account of comparative prudential value fail. Further, such an account is incompatible with the plausible assumption that comparative value supervenes on intrinsic value and leads to well-known intransitivity problems. Finally, I present a novel argument that shows that asymmetric accounts of comparative value allow for malignant chain reactions and the possibility of justifiedly discounting interests of future generations. These arguments against the axiological Asymmetry Thesis set adequacy conditions for any theory of comparative values and any explanation of the ethical asymmetry thesis.

Keywords:

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Introduction

There's a common claim in population ethics and the ethics of procreation according to which there is a crucial ethical asymmetry: While we are obliged (or have strong reasons) to avoid creating unhappy people, we are not obliged (or have strong reasons) to create happy people (cf. McMahan 1981: 100; McMahan 2009; Roberts 2011a; Roberts 2011b; Frick 2020: 54; Bader 2022; Thornley 2023).[1] David Benatar (2006) argues that this *ethical asymmetry* is to be explained in terms of an *axiological asymmetry*[2] concerning what states are comparatively good or bad for an individual: According to his Asymmetry Thesis, pain and pleasure (or, more generally, negative and positive intrinsic, i.e., non-comparative,[3] prudential values) differ in how they contribute to comparative prudential value in comparisons between a state where the subject in question exists and states where it does not exist (from now on, I call these existence–nonexistence comparisons). I will argue that the Asymmetry Thesis is conceptually inconsistent or at least *practically self-defeating*. The analysis of this failure, in turn, is relevant for the more general discussion of how intrinsic and comparative prudential value depend on each other. My overall goal is to show that any account of comparative value that involves a Benatar-like asymmetry between harms and benefits for existence–nonexistence comparisons leads to untenable results. If successful, then, my arguments yield some general adequacy conditions for how we should evaluate the comparative value of two scenarios where some relevant entities exist in only one of these scenarios.[4]

Comparative value assessments are of crucial importance for our practical choices, including questions of procreation. When assessing the comparative value of a decision to procreate, in turn, we must make precisely such an existence–nonexistence comparison, as some

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[1] A second, much-discussed and tightly related alleged ethical asymmetry is that should make people that already exist but that there is no analogous normative reason to *create* happy people, cf. Narveson 1973: 80.

[2] There is, of course, a common line of argument for the ethical asymmetry thesis that builds on an asymmetry claim in *population axiology*, that is: a claim about the non-prudential comparative values *simpliciter* of populations with different sizes and wellbeing-distributions. (But see, e.g., Arrhenius 2000 and Arrhenius 2011 for a demonstration of how hard it is to find a satisfying theory of population axiology in general, let alone one that supports the ethical asymmetry thesis). Benatar, by contrast, locates the asymmetry already on the *individual* level in terms of comparative *prudential* value, that is: in terms of what is good or bad for an individual.

[3] In what follows, I use the expression *intrinsic* value to refer to what is good or bad in some non-comparative, absolute sense, in and of itself. While *absolute* value might, in fact, be more fitting, it is less commonly used in the literature and might be confused with *net* value or with value *simpliciter*. Note, however, that this does not mean that comparative value is *extrinsic* in the sense of *instrumental,* i.e., valuable via its contribution to something intrinsically good or bad.

[4] In accordance with standard terminology, I here use "scenario" roughly in the sense of a non-maximal state of affairs, in contrast to possible worlds, understood roughly as *maximal* states of affairs where any detail whatsoever is specified.

relevant entity exists only in the scenario in which we chose to procreate. If my arguments are sound, we should conclude that if we accept that non-existence is comparatively good, when comparing it with a net bad life, we must also accept that non-existence is comparatively bad, when comparing it with a net good life.[5] Analogously, if we accept that a miserable life is comparatively bad (that is: worse than non-existence), we must also accept that a happy life is comparatively good (that is: better than non-existence). If, to the contrary, we want to deny one, we must deny both. So, for example, if we want to say that it does not even make sense to say that it is better *for* me to live a happy life than never to have come into existence, we must also say that it makes no sense to say that it is worse *for* me to live a horrible life than never to have come into existence. We face a *symmetrical* structure. Asymmetrical views in population ethics and the ethics of procreation, then, should not be built upon an asymmetrical *axiology*.

The best shot for ethical asymmetrists, then, is to explain the purported ethical asymmetry in terms of an asymmetry in the true *moral* theory that cannot be eliminated by tracing it back to an asymmetrical axiological theory—say, because we have "stronger duties not to harm than to benefit" (DeGrazia 2010: 322, cf. Sludds 2003), because rights are "negative rather than positive" (Persson 2009: 30), because "duties require victims" (Harrison 2012), because duties require that not meeting them is reason for *complaint* (cf. Lerner 2023: 1176), because "our reasons to benefit people are bearer-regarding" (Frick 2020: 69), or because we should always choose the option with the least amount of harm done to those people that exist in the scenario (Meacham 2012).

I will proceed as follows: First, I will present the Asymmetry Thesis that features as one of the crucial premises for Benatar's Asymmetry Argument towards the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm. Then, I present his abductive argument for the Asymmetry Thesis. By stressing Benatar's distinction between intrinsic and comparative prudential value, the underlying structure becomes visible: The Asymmetry Thesis is, at its core, the claim that there's a fundamental asymmetry between pain and pleasure in how *comparative* prudential value is to be evaluated given the non-comparative, intrinsic prudential value of the states in question. While in case of pain the mode of evaluation is the same in existence–existence and in existence–nonexistence comparisons, there is a distinct mode of determining the comparative prudential

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[5] While I will, due to my focus on Benatar's specific version of the axiological asymmetry thesis, phrase the discussion in terms of *prudential* comparative values, my conclusion should, in principle, extend to non-prudential comparative values *simpliciter*, too: The same structural problems would arise for a theory of comparative value *simpliciter* that treats pain and pleasure asymmetrically in existence–existence and existence–nonexistence comparisons.

value of pleasure in existence–nonexistence comparisons. In the second section, I argue that all natural attempts to spell out these axiological claims underlying the Asymmetry Thesis lead to an axiological symmetry in the end. The remaining option for Benatar is to claim that the axiological asymmetry is an inexplicable brute fact. In the third section I present Campbell Brown's Intransitivity Argument, according to which the Asymmetry Thesis implies the intransitivity of the better-than relation and, related to this, the falling apart of goodness and betterness. I argue that this failing of transitivity, too, is rooted in Benatar's claims about how intrinsic and comparative prudential values are interconnected. In the fourth section, I present a dilemma on this basis and argue that, to avoid it, Benatar must give up the intuitive claim that the intrinsic prudential values of two states determine their respective comparative prudential value. Fourth, and lastly, I present a novel argument that shows that Benatar's theory implies the possibility of malignant chain reactions: If the Asymmetry Thesis is true, it is possible that there is an arbitrarily long chain of events such that every event is comparatively arbitrarily good while all events taken together are comparatively arbitrarily bad, judged on the basis of the personal interests of the very same people. I conclude that Benatar's theory is practically self-defeating and that we should accept that the evaluation of comparative prudential value in terms of positive and negative intrinsic prudential value is fundamentally symmetric with respect to existence and non-existence.

1 A Reconstruction of the Asymmetry Argument

The Asymmetry Argument basically states that:

AP1: There is a fundamental axiological asymmetry between pain and pleasure[6].

AP2: If there is such an asymmetry, coming into existence is always a (net) harm.

AC: Coming into existence is always a (net) harm.[7]

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[6] As I am mostly concerned with structural features of the asymmetry thesis, I want to set aside the question of whether pain and pleasure are the one and only thing that is good and bad for a person. Thus, we might rephrase the entire discussion in terms of the axiologically more neutral expressions *positive and negative intrinsic prudential value*.

[7] Every part of the Asymmetry Argument has been heavily criticized. For example, it has been argued that its conclusion doesn't even make sense (due to considerations along the lines of the famous "Non-Identity Problem", cf. Benatar 2006: 18ff.; Hallich 2018: 181–186; Vohánka 2019: 79). Others have argued that its conclusion (or some implication of the conclusion) is obviously false and, thus, a reductio of its assumptions (cf. Packer 2011: 226; Strang 2017: 1), that the Asymmetry Thesis (AP1) has untenable implications (cf. Bradley 2010), that the choice of comparative values therein is undermotivated (see Harman 2006: 779), that there is a fundamental symmetry (cf.

The alleged asymmetry between pain and pleasure, as stated in AP1, concerns their respective prudential value when we compare a state where they are present with a state where they are absent due to non-existence of someone to experience them: While "1) the presence of pain is bad" and "2) the presence of pleasure is good" Benatar claims that "3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone", but "4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation" (Benatar 2006: 30). This is what I call the "Asymmetry Thesis" in what follows.

Benatar's talk about the absence (or presence) of pain (or pleasure) seems to be elliptical: Arguably, we could rephrase it as "absence of an *experience* of pain". Making this ellipsis explicit makes the urgency of offering an explication of the underlying metaphysics of the Asymmetry Thesis even clearer. Keeping in mind that we are concerned with *prudential* values, "the absence of an experience of pain is *prudentially* good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone" sounds, at the very least, very puzzling. To avoid the impression that it is even *nonsensical,* a theoretical framework is required that allows for a rational reconstruction of this claim. I turn to some attempts at offering such a framework in the next section.

The central argument for the Asymmetry Thesis is an abductive argument: Benatar claims that the following four (purportedly) intuitive asymmetries are best explained in terms of the Asymmetry Thesis and that we should, therefore, accept it:

(I) "While there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, there is no duty to bring happy people into being" (Benatar 2006: 32)

(II) "Whereas it is strange (if not incoherent) to give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited, it is not strange to cite a potential child's interests as a basis for avoiding bringing a child into existence" (Benatar 2006: 34)

Kaposy 2009; Persson 2009: 29), that the four explananda of the abductive argument are not intuitive at all, that there is another, better explanation for them (McLean 2015; DeGrazia 2010: 322; McMahan 2009; Harman 2009: 78; Roberts 2012; cf. Parsons 2002), that they don't need any explanation since they are fundamental (cf. McMahan 2002: 353f.), that being the best explanation alone does not justify the Asymmetry Thesis (cf. Magnusson 2019: 676), that the Asymmetry Thesis does not imply the conclusion (cf. Magnusson 2019: 679-682), and that it focusses too much on (some kind of) hedonic values (cf. DeGrazia 2010: 326).

(III) "Bringing people into existence as well as failing to bring people into existence can be regretted. However, only bringing people into existence can be regretted *for* the sake of the person whose existence was contingent on our decision" (Benatar 2006: 34)

(IV) "Whereas […] we rightly are sad for inhabitants of a foreign land whose lives are characterized by suffering, when we hear that some island is unpopulated, we are not similarly sad for the happy people who, had they existed, would have populated this island" (Benatar 2006: 35)[8]

Let's turn once more to the Asymmetry Thesis, as it requires some clarification because the original formulation is ambiguous. Once we have a non-ambiguous formulation of the Asymmetry thesis we can complete Benatar's argument by showing how the Asymmetry Thesis (purportedly) explains the above explananda.

Benatar uses the following table to present the Asymmetry Thesis:

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of pain (Bad)	(3) Absence of pain (Good)
(2) Presence of pleasure (Good)	(4) Absence of pleasure (Not bad)

This table, however, is quite confusing and, given the most natural reading, mistaken in the light of Benatar's own theory (namely his *goal* to show that coming into existence is always a harm and his abductive *argument* for the asymmetry). But evidently Benatar doesn't believe that the absence of pain due to non-existence has a positive *intrinsic* prudential value. Also, while the absence of pleasure due to non-existence does not have a negative *intrinsic* prudential value, this is not what matters here. Instead, Benatar's claim is that absence of pain due to non-existence is prudentially *better* than presence of pain, that is: it is *comparatively* good and thus preferable, while absence of pleasure due to non-existence is *not prudentially worse* than presence of pleasure, that is: it is comparatively not bad and thus the presence of pleasure is not preferable (Benatar 2006: 40-42; 57; Benatar 2012: 144f.). Since, in ordinary contexts "not bad" and "not worse" ["good" and "better"]

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[8] The third and the fourth asymmetries are problematic because they build on a comparison of the absence of pleasure due to *non-existence* with the presence of pain in an *existing* person. For a telling result we should reformulate them. The question would then be whether it's intuitive that (III) failing to bring people into existence can be welcomed (regarding the absence of pain) but not regretted (regarding the absence of pleasure) *for* the sake of the person whose existence was contingent on our decision, and (IV) when we hear that some island is unpopulated, we are happy for the suffering people, but not similarly sad for the happy people who, had they existed, would have populated this island.

mean quite different things and since he uses the terms "good" and "bad" in the *intrinsic* sense in the first column of his table, and not in a *comparative* sense, the table should be changed accordingly to make the difference between intrinsic and comparative prudential value explicit:

Scenario A (X exists)	Scenario B (X never exists)
(1) Presence of pain (Intrinsically Bad)	(3) Absence of pain (Better than (1))
(2) Presence of pleasure (Intrinsically Good)	(4) Absence of pleasure (Not worse than (2))

We might further add that, according to Benatar, in case of existence, there is a symmetry between the absence of pain and the absence of pleasure: The former is comparatively good, and the latter is comparatively bad. We therefore have an asymmetry between pain and pleasure in how they contribute to comparative prudential value judgements in existence–nonexistence comparisons as opposed to existence–existence comparisons.

Given this reformulation of the Asymmetry Thesis in terms of comparative prudential value, we can easily explain the four intuitive asymmetries: If the presence of pleasure is not prudentially better than absence of pleasure due to non-existence, it obviously cannot be a reason for favouring having a child compared with not having it, and failing to bring a child into existence cannot be regretted for the child's own sake. Also, there cannot be a duty to produce happy people if it is not worse for them not to exist. The fourth asymmetry is equally easily explained: Since it is not worse for the people who could have lived on an unpopulated far-off island that they do not exist than having come into a very happy existence without any harm, there is just no reason to be sad for them, while we are rightly sad for inhabitants of a foreign land whose lives are characterized by suffering, since it is bad for them and much worse than non-existence would have been for them.

If the Asymmetry Thesis is only about the *comparative* prudential values of the absence of pain and pleasure due to non-existence, what does Benatar think about their non-comparative, *intrinsic* prudential value? Well, in terms of the latter the table would indeed look quite different, since Benatar thinks not just that pain is intrinsically bad and pleasure is intrinsically good for the one who enjoy them, but also that both absence of pain *and* of pleasure due to non-existence are intrinsically neutral (Benatar 2012: 144f.). So, here we have a perfect symmetry.

The question, then, is how intrinsic and comparative prudential values are interconnected. Ordinarily, we would assume that the latter is just the *difference* between the two relevant intrinsic values, as we would do when evaluating who of two women is taller than the other: We take the size of the first one, subtract the size of the other and the result tells us how much *taller* the first one is than the second one. Similarly, one might suppose, we can evaluate the *comparative* prudential value of a scenario *s1* in comparison with a scenario *s2* by subtracting the total prudential value of *s2* from the total prudential value of *s1*. *s1* is comparatively *good* for the subject in question if and only if the result is bigger than 0. For example, Steven Luper suggests in this spirit that the overall prudential value (in our terminology: the comparative prudential value) of an actual event E^9 for a subject S equals the sum of all intrinsic prudential values for S, positive or negative, in the actual world, minus what the sum of all intrinsic prudential values for S would have been if E had not taken place. (Luper 2009: 85; cf. Nagel 1970: 78; Quinn 1984: 41f.; Feldman 1992).[10] Note that such a claim about a necessary dependence of comparative value on intrinsic value is not necessarily a grounding claim.

But this necessary dependence claim cannot be accepted by Benatar when it comes to the comparative value of pleasure or its absence due to non-existence, for the difference between a positive number and 0 is positive, which would render the result that absence of pleasure due to non-existence is comparatively bad, that is: *worse* than presence of pleasure in case of existence. Benatar must, therefore, claim that the pleasure-line in the table must somehow *not be considered* in the comparative evaluation of scenarios A and B at all. He has to "block" the comparison in some way.[11] Harman interprets Benatar's theory in this spirit when she writes:

> Benatar says that the good things in a person's life are not *better* than their absence, because their absence is not bad—indeed it has no value at all. Nor, Benatar points out, is the alternative *that the person is in a neutral state;* rather, in the alternative, she doesn't exist at all. He concedes that it is better to have pleasure

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[9] Comparative value judgments can, as in Luper's account, come *without* making the comparison explicit. It is, for example, common to analyze the claim that death is bad for the one who dies as a *comparative* value judgement, although you cannot read this off the surface grammar.

[10] This account of comparative values is not as innocent as it might look, as much of the verdicts it yields depends upon which theory of counterfactuals we plug into it. It is not clear, for example, whether there always *is* one particular overall value of an actual event, given this account, as one might follow Lewis's (1973) rejection of the Uniqueness assumption and accept that there can be more than one antecedent world relevant for the evaluation of a counterfactual, with different sums of prudential values for S. In the light of Alan Hájek's arguments in his (2020), this might even be the case for *most* such counterfactuals. Still, I think, Luper's surface-level theory provides a natural starting point and is flexible enough to be spelled out in different ways making it worth further investigation in the future.

[11] For a discussion of an Asymmetry Thesis based on the notion of incommensurability, see Nebel 2019.

than to be in a neutral state. However, he says, if what we are comparing is something good with something that lacks any value at all (I think he means it does not even have a neutral value), then it's not true that the good thing is better than the other. (Harman 2009: 780)

The suggested move is to assign *no* intrinsic prudential value at all to the absence of pleasure due to non-existence, not even a neutral 0. This manoeuvre is at odds with Benatar's claim that it "is intrinsically value-neutral (neither good nor bad)" (Benatar 2012: 145), but it may well be worth a change of mind for Benatar, since otherwise he'd have to argue explicitly against the intuitively very convincing claim that comparative prudential values of states supervene on intrinsic prudential values of the states in question (see section 4).

Somewhat strangely, now, Benatar seems to evaluate the comparative prudential value of experiences of *pain* in existence–nonexistence comparisons exactly in this intuitive way: We have a negative intrinsic prudential value for its presence, a neutral intrinsic prudential value for its absence due to non-existence, and by subtracting the latter from the former we get a negative comparative prudential value for the presence of pain while we get a positive comparative value for its absence due to non-existence by reversing the direction of subtraction.[12] This does, of course, not mean that the subject in case of non-existence would then *exist* in some intrinsically prudentially neutral *state*. Still, we can make sense of the idea that non-existence is intrinsically value-neutral for the subject in terms of which way the world to be like is *preferable* to the subject (cf. Benatar 2006: 21f., 28).

So, the asymmetry between pain and pleasure isn't an asymmetry in intrinsic prudential value but in *how the comparative prudential value of pain and pleasure is to be evaluated*: The comparative prudential value of pleasure can only be determined via subtraction if we compare it with absence of pleasure while the subject exists. In case of non-existence any such calculation is fundamentally flawed, according to Benatar. Instead of a numerical comparison we can only state that absence of pleasure in case of non-existence isn't worse than its presence. In this sense, the comparison is blocked. In case of pain, the same mode of determining the comparative prudential value that is used when comparing to states of existence is also used when comparing a state of

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[12] Note that a Luper-style account of comparative values does not entail that the absence of pain due to non-existence is comparatively good, as one could, on principled grounds, reject the idea that in this case prudential value judgements make sense at all. Here, I am just concerned with how to understand the asymmetry thesis and not, yet, with evaluating it. What is important for now is only that Benatar treats pain and pleasure asymmetrically in how the absolute values of their experience and their non-experience due to non-existence relate to their comparative value. I come back to the discussion of whether one can ascribe comparative prudential values in existence–nonexistence comparisons at all in the next section.

existence with non-existence. So, according to the thesis, two fundamentally different modes of comparison are needed.

Now that we have a quite comprehensible reconstruction of the Asymmetry Thesis, we also get a clearer understanding of Benatar's conclusion: That coming into existence is always a harm does *not* mean that it is always *bad* for us. It just means that it is always *worse* for us than not coming into existence. It makes the person coming into existence *worse off*. Nevertheless, existence can be intrinsically very *good* for the person coming into it, according to the correctly understood Asymmetry Thesis, while non-existence is always intrinsically neutral (or, maybe, value-less, see the following section) for the non-existent.

2 Explications Collapsing into Symmetry

Although some of his critics accuse him of "equivocat[ing] between impersonal goodness and goodness for a person" (Harman 2009: 780), Benatar is pretty clear that the Asymmetry Thesis (that is used in the Asymmetry Argument to show that coming into existence is always a harm and, thus, bad *for the person* coming into existence) is solely concerned with goodness for a person, that is, with prudential value (Benatar 2013: 125f.; Magnusson 2019: 676). To make sense of his thesis thus we must understand what exactly he means when he says that absence of pain due to non-existence is comparatively good *for* the non-existing person and that absence of pleasure due to non-existence is comparatively not bad *for* the non-existing person.

There are at least four ways to spell out these claims, because we can consider either only actual or also merely possible people for evaluations of comparative prudential value and because one can evaluate the comparative prudential value of a scenario on the basis of the agent's *actual* interests or on the basis of the interests a person would have in the respective scenario. The question in this section is, thus, whether a look at the metaphysics underlying claims of comparative prudential value can make sense of Benatar's claim that there are two different modes of determining the comparative value of pleasure (one for existence–existence comparisons, another for existence–nonexistence comparisons), while there's only one mode of determining the comparative value of pain.

As a first approach we could make the actualist assumption that something can only be comparatively good or bad *for* someone who *actually exists* (cf. Parsons 2002). How, then, could

we understand the claim that the absence of pain due to non-existence is good for a subject? First, we could try to combine the actualist assumption with a *counterfactual* analysis: Just like we can ask of an actual state a person is in whether or not this state is comparatively good or bad for her, given her *actual* interests, we can think about a *counterfactual* scenario and ask whether it is in the interests she *would* have in this scenario that the scenario obtains. When I think about an alternative life I could have lived, this seems, at least at first glance, to work well. But it obviously does not work for the evaluation of the comparative prudential value of a scenario where the subject in question does not exist, because in any such scenario the subject *has* no interests. It is obvious that this cannot be what Benatar thinks, for it implies that neither absence of pain nor absence of pleasure can be comparatively good or bad for somebody if it is due to non-existence. We can, according to this view, only make comparative prudential value judgements about scenarios in which the person in question exists.[13] This first proposal therefore yields a symmetric account.

But here is a second way to spell out the Asymmetry Thesis from the actualist starting point of considering only actual people and their interests: We can add that the *actual* interests of a person are also relevant in the evaluation of *counterfactual* scenarios. The idea is that while it is only actually existing people's interests that count, these actual interests can concern non-actual circumstances: We can judge the prudential value of a *non-actual* scenario in terms of the *actual* interests of an actual person. When Benatar says that for an actually existing person "the absence of the pain would have been [comparatively prudentially] good even though this person would then not have existed" (Benatar 2006: 31), he seems to suggest exactly this: that we evaluate a counterfactual scenario based on the actual interests of an actual person. According to this proposal, then, the actual interests are, so to say, *rigidified*, according to this suggestion: Even when evaluating merely possible scenarios with respect to their comparative prudential value, we must base our evaluation on the *actual* interests of the people in question. This has the somewhat nice consequence that we could make sense of the claim that it would have been better for some actually existing people never to have existed and still avoid claiming that the non-existence of merely possible people *is* good for them.

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[13] Although clearly incompatible with the Asymmetry Thesis, Parsons argues that this view might explain at least some of the intuitive asymmetries (For a criticism on his arguments, see Miller 2003 and Sludds 2003).

I think that this view is quite attractive on inspection, although it has some surprising implications. For instance, it yields the verdict that for actual people who live a miserable life it is comparatively bad that they came into existence. In this sense, then, judged from the perspective of the actual world where they exist, we can say that it would have been better for them if they had never come into existence. Yet, if they *had* not come into existence, that is: judged from the counterfactual standpoint of this scenario, this would *not* have been comparatively good for them, because there would not have been anybody for whom this could have been comparatively good. The apparent contradiction between these claims is only superficial.[14] Analogously, for net happy people it is comparatively good, according to this view, that they came into existence. But if they had not come into existence, this would not have been comparatively bad for them. What does this mean for the decisions about procreation? Assume that you decide whether or not to procreate and assume that you know that if you were to procreate, your offspring would live a life worth living: According to the above picture, then, you can conclude that (1) if you decide to procreate there will be a person for whom it is comparatively good that they came into existence, while (2) if you decide not to procreate there won't be anyone for whom it is comparatively bad that they did not come into existence. In other words: you benefit someone by bringing them into existence but you don't harm anyone by not bringing anyone into existence. Analogously, if you know that if you were to procreate, your offspring would live a horrible life, you can conclude that by procreating you would harm somebody although you would not benefit anybody by not procreating.

The problem with this view for the defender of the Asymmetry Thesis is that the view seems to inevitably yield a symmetry concerning pain and pleasure: Why wouldn't the absence of pleasure, symmetrically, be bad in the light of the actual person's interests if it was due to her non-existence in the counterfactual scenario? To experience pleasure is clearly in the actual interest of actual people. Benatar rightly doesn't deny this.

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[14] Perhaps the best way to spell out this idea would be in terms of an Adams-style account of actuality and the difference between *truth in* and *truth at* a world. He writes: "A world story that includes no singular proposition about me […] represents my possible non-existence, not by including the proposition that I do not exist but simply by omitting me. That I would not exist if all the propositions it includes […] were true is not a fact internal to the world that it describes, but an observation that we make from our vantage point in the actual world, about the relation of that world story to an individual of the actual world." (Adams 1981: 22) Within this strictly actualist framework, we could describe the situation as follows: The consequent of the counterfactual that leads to the comparative prudential value judgement is true *at* the relevant antecedent-worlds, but not true *in* them, as the world just omits the individual in question rather than describing it as being better off in comparison with the actual world where they have a miserable life. I think that this account fares well with respect to consistency worries about comparative value judgements in existence–nonexistence comparisons, as expressed, for example, by Feinberg (1986: 158).

Apart from an actualist view, we could try to spell out the metaphysical underpinning of the Asymmetry Thesis in *possibilist* terms by allowing *merely possible people* to feature in evaluations of comparative prudential value. Benatar claims that we can also say something about what is good or bad for people that exist only in non-actual worlds. How so? Well, we could, thirdly, talk about *merely possible people* for whom it is *actually* good that they are not actual and by this means avoid pain, presuming actual interests of non-actual people and evaluate the states of existence and non-existence with respect to pain and pleasure relative to these interests. This position, however, is quite strange: Having interests requires existence. But in addition to this, it seems hard to avoid a symmetry even if we could make sense of this position: If it is good for the merely possible person that she avoids pain via her non-actuality, it only seems natural to say that it is bad for the merely possible person that she misses pleasure due to her non-actuality. Anyway, Benatar explicitly refuses this way of understanding his thesis, calling it "absurd" (Benatar 2006: 31).

The fourth alternative that I see, then, is to look at merely possible people and the interests they *would* have if they existed. In this spirit, Benatar writes: "We may not know who that person would have been, but we can still say that […] the avoidance of his or her pains is good when judged in terms of his or her potential interests." (ibid.). Thus, we can evaluate the prudential value of their actual non-existence relative to their non-actual interests. In this sense, Benatar claims that the claim that the absence of pain is good for someone who does not exist should be understood "in terms of the interests of the person who would otherwise have existed" (ibid.). For example, we consider a non-actual possible world in which someone (who doesn't exist in the actual world)[15] suffers horrible headache and judge from her point of view (situated in the non-actual world) that avoiding the pain via non-existence would be good. But again, as Magnusson points out, the problem arises that it just seems natural to say in this spirit that from her point of view missing a pleasure she experiences (say: listening to a great concert) due to non-existence would be bad: As the absence of the headache makes non-existence *ceteris paribus* preferable from her non-actual point of view, so does the presence of pleasure make existence *ceteris paribus* preferable from the non-actual point of view, or so it seems. (Magnusson 2019: 677-678)

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[15] Just suppose, for the sake of the argument and pace Williamson 2013, that necessitism is false and that, thus, there could have been things that do not actually exist.

So, it seems that the Asymmetry Thesis can hardly be motivated by spelling it out in terms of some more basic metaphysical theory about modality, persons and their interests. Any such attempt seems to favour symmetry. What speaks in favour of it is solely the abductive argument (that has its own weaknesses, due to the tendentious, potentially adulterant set-up of the explananda on the one side [see n. 8] and several competing explanations on the other [see n. 7 for references]). It seems, then, that neither actualist nor possibilist theories, neither theories that focus on actual interests nor theories that focus on counterfactual interests can explain *why* there is an asymmetry. Arguably, then, a defender of an axiological asymmetry thesis can only claim that it is an inexplicable *brute fact*. But this is a highly unattractive position because the Asymmetry Thesis has at least the appearance of being complex and derived, hence explicable, and even *in need of* an explanation.

Interestingly, Benatar makes a similar point against McMahan. McMahan suggests that the *ethical* asymmetry is fundamental and inexplicable. But this, Benatar claims, is unsatisfying, because the ethical asymmetry "invites an explanation". He writes:

> Surely it cannot simply and inexplicably be the case that we have a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence but we have no duty to bring happy people into existence? I understand that at some point in an explanatory regression there can be no further explanation. Some claims may be foundational and have no deeper explanation. Nevertheless the claim that we have a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence but no duty to bring happy people into existence is a claim that invites an explanation. (Benatar 2013: 130)

Now, it seems to be no illegitimate push of the explanatory regression to say exactly the same about Benatar's suggested axiological asymmetry: that it "cannot simply and inexplicably be the case," but that it "invites an explanation". Yes, pleasure is pleasure and pain is pain—they are different things and have different features. But the problem isn't that there is no *perfect* symmetry. Assume there were an asymmetry concerning the possible maximal intensity of the two feelings: This would hardly seem equally in need of an explanation and claiming that it was a brute fact wouldn't sound nearly as problematic. The problem seems rather to be that the purported asymmetry occurs concerning features which, we'd expect, do not depend on the nature of pleasure and pain, but on facts about people, their interests, and modal metaphysics. This impression is reflected in the apparent naturalness of approaching the explanation-problem by discussing whether merely possible people can have interests, whether it makes sense to say that counterfactual scenarios that do not include a person are in or against this person's interests and so

on[16]—an approach Benatar takes himself. The nature of pain [pleasure], in contrast, seems only to determine whether it is in or against our interests to experience it rather than the question how it features in existence–nonexistence comparisons to determine comparative prudential value. So, it's a real burden that there doesn't seem to be a way of deriving (or explaining) the distinction of two modes of comparison in case of pleasure as opposed to the single mode of comparison in case of pain.

3 The Transitivity Argument

In the remainder of this paper, I will present two arguments against the Asymmetry Thesis that show, if successful, that the Asymmetry Thesis has unacceptable implications concerning the relation between intrinsic and comparative prudential value: The Determination Argument and the Chain Reaction Argument. These arguments are connected to the Transitivity Argument presented and, subsequently, defended by Campbell Brown (2011: 47-49; Brown 2013): All three arguments raise problems that stem from Benatar's assumption that there are *two* modes of comparative evaluation of states a person is in when it's about pleasure—one for existence–existence comparisons, another for existence–nonexistence comparisons—while there's only one in case of pain. Therefore, let us first have a look at Brown's Transitivity Argument.

The crucial claim is that Benatar's Asymmetry Thesis violates the transitivity of the "better than" relation and the "equally good as" relation in an unacceptable way. The argument has roughly the following structure:

TP1: "x is better than y (for person z)" is a transitive relation (at least in the present case).

TP2: If the Asymmetry Thesis is true, "x is better than y (for person z)" isn't a transitive relation (in the present case).

TC: The Asymmetry Thesis is not true.

For the moment, I shall presuppose that TP1 is an evident a priori truth and go immediately to TP2, which, I suppose, is less evident.

According to Benatar, although coming into existence is *always* a net harm for the person herself (and, accordingly, no actual life is worth starting), it is not *necessarily* so (Benatar 2006:

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[16] See Parfit 1984: Appendix G for a seminal discussion of these questions.

28f.). This is, we should note, not an independent thesis but follows immediately from his Asymmetry Argument. Since according to the Asymmetry Thesis the absence of positive intrinsic prudential value due to someone's non-existence is not (comparatively) bad, even the smallest negative intrinsic prudential value contained in her life makes coming into existence a harm for her. But if, as most philosophers would grant, a life without any negative intrinsic prudential value whatsoever and with some positive intrinsic prudential value is *possible,* so is a life that is not comparatively bad to have for the one living it. According to Benatar, to live such a life is neither better nor worse than never to exist (Benatar 2006: 28f.).

Now, let A be a life containing no pain[17] at all and just minimal pleasure, let B be a life with minimal pain and a huge amount of pleasure and let C be the state of non-existence. Given the Asymmetry Thesis, the comparative evaluation of this toy example must look like this: When comparing A and B, the existence–existence mode of evaluating a state comparatively is to be applied. This means that we can just subtract the intrinsic value of A from the intrinsic value of B. By contrast, the *second* mode of determining the comparative value of two states must be applied when comparing A and C or B and C instead. Here, simple subtraction of intrinsic values is precluded, according to the Asymmetry Thesis. Instead, the pleasure line of the table is just eliminated. In our toy example the application of these two distinct modes of comparison yields the comparative value judgement C is better than B and B is better than $A,$ but C is not better than A (they are equally good). Therefore, the Asymmetry Thesis violates the transitivity of the "better than" relation.

In a slightly modified constellation, we could also compare A and C with B^*, being a life with no pain and a huge amount of pleasure. In this case, applying the two different modes of comparison yields the comparative value judgement that A and C are equally good, B^* and C are equally good, but B^* is not equally good as A (B^* is better than $A).$ Therefore, the Asymmetry Thesis violates the transitivity of the "equally good as"-relation.

Of course, Benatar could just bite the bullet and accept that these relations are intransitive, as others have done in different discussions where transitivity arguments were brought up (cf. Temkin 1987; Temkin 1996; Parsons 2002: 142; Brown 2011: 47f.). But it is a hard bullet to bite as both relations seem to be paradigm cases of transitive relations. Also, moral decisions would

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[17] Again, this could be rephrased more neutrally in terms of negative and positive intrinsic prudential value.

become impossible in many cases if they weren't: What should I do if I had the choice to bring about one of three states of affairs *P, Q,* or *R*, where *P* is better than *Q, Q* is better than *R,* and *R* is better than *P*? It does not just seem hardly decidable; we might even get the impression that there just *cannot be a moral fact* about what is the right thing to do in this case.

With this background, I now turn to the presentation of the Dilemma Argument and the Chain Reaction Argument, strengthening the case against evaluating the comparative value of two states in different modes, depending on the existence or non-existence of the subject in the respective scenarios.

4 The Determination Argument

Here is the Determination Argument:

DP1: If the Asymmetry Thesis is true, then: If for every person A and every state *s* that A could be in,[18] *s* has a determinate net intrinsic prudential value for A, then whether one state *s1* is better than another state *s2* is not always determined by their respective net intrinsic prudential value.

DP2: If the Asymmetry Thesis is true, then: If it is not the case that for every person A and every state *s* that A could be in, *s* has a determinate net intrinsic prudential value for A, then whether one state *s1* is better than another state *s2* is not always determined by their respective net intrinsic prudential value.

DIC: If the Asymmetry Thesis is true, then whether one state *s1* is better than another state *s2* is not always determined by their net respective intrinsic prudential value.

DP3: Whether one state *s1* is better than another state *s2* is always determined by their respective net intrinsic prudential value.

DC: The Asymmetry Thesis is false.

It is easy to see why DP2 is true. Assume that there are two states, s1 and s2, such that s1 is better for S to be in than s2, while there is no fact about how net good s2 is for her to be in in

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terms of non-comparative, *intrinsic* prudential value. Benatar might suggest this for cases of non-existence to avoid ascribing an intrinsic prudential value to the absence of pleasure due to non-existence to block a comparison with presence of pleasure, because this would presumably result in ascribing a positive comparative value to the latter. But given this assumption, the betterness of s1 cannot be determined by the net intrinsic prudential values of s1 and s2: What isn't there cannot determine anything. Note, though, that Benatar cannot say that in these cases there is no fact about which state to be in would be better for S to be in, either. He commits himself to accepting that such comparisons are *always* possible (contrary to Heyd's (2009) claim that it is impossible to evaluate the comparative value of a state in an existence–nonexistence comparison).

To see why DP1 is true assume, following the antecedent of the nested conditional, that each state a person could be in has a net intrinsic prudential value. Thus, in case the person does not exist we can assign a net intrinsic prudential value to this state (say, relative to the interests the person has in the worlds in which she exists) just like we can in case she *does* exist. Since the Asymmetry Thesis implies that there are two different modes for evaluating one state in comparison with another (one for comparisons with other possible lives the person could live, one for comparisons with non-existence) the intrinsic prudential values of two states do not fully determine the comparative prudential values of these states: For some comparisons we are asked to ignore the pleasure adding to this intrinsic prudential value of the state while we are to consider the pleasure additionally in other cases, although the net intrinsic prudential value is the same. So, knowing the net intrinsic values of two states isn't enough to determine the comparative value of each. This loosens the "better than"-relation from the evaluation of how good the two compared states are on their own. Nobody will be surprised by this after examining Brown's Transitivity Argument, for any theory of comparative prudential value linking it directly to numerically representable intrinsic prudential value such that the latter determines the former is such that transitivity holds.

DP3 might seem like a rather trivial analytic truth. Nevertheless, it is arguably the premise Benatar would reject. He could reply (in the spirit Harman's quote above) that possible *lives* always have a determinate net intrinsic prudential value for the subject, and that their comparative prudential value *is* always determined by the respective net intrinsic values. However, there is no fact about how good, in absolute terms, *non-existence* would be for this person. Nevertheless, the state of non-existence can be one of the relata in the "better than" relation. So, the intuitive way of

determining comparative prudential value via the net intrinsic prudential values of the two scenarios (and, thus, transitivity) is at least preserved for existence–existence comparisons. Since most ordinary comparative value judgements are existence–existence comparisons, this lowers the cost of allowing for violations of these principles in existence–nonexistence comparisons. So, Benatar might conclude, denying DP3 isn't so bad if done carefully.

But this is deeply dissatisfying: Benatar must still admit that a life can be good, *very* good indeed, for the person who lives it, while claiming that (a) non-existence would be better for that person, although (b) non-existence is not good for that person (since, either, there is no fact about how good it is intrinsically for someone to be in the state of non-existence at all, or because it has a neutral net intrinsic prudential value). But to say that something is better than something else which has a positive value just *means* that it also has a positive value that is even higher than that. Something that is better than something good must be good, too. So, this argument boils down to a variant of the key argument in Bradley (2010). He writes: "If pleasure is intrinsically good, and the absence of pleasure is not, then pleasure must be intrinsically better than the absence of pleasure. To claim otherwise is to wreak havoc with the logic of preferability or betterness." (Bradley 2010: 2)

My argument differs in two ways from Bradley's: First, my argument concerns the *states* a person is in, and how goodness and betterness behave there, while Bradley's concerns *pleasure and its absence*, and how goodness and betterness behave there according to Benatar. So, he focuses on the asymmetry itself, while I focus on the evaluations that it yields. Second, he looks at what Benatar claims to be good and not good and argues that the very meaning of these claims implies that one is better than the other. I, instead, look at what Benatar claims to be better than something else of which he claims that it is good and argue that the very meaning of these claims implies that the former is also good (and even that it has a positive net intrinsic prudential value even higher than the other). The underlying problem is the same: Benatar's Asymmetry Thesis implies a theory of intrinsic and comparative prudential value that conflicts with common sense and well-established principles.

There's one further worry: Why should we care about the comparative prudential value of a state at all, if Benatar is right about how it is to be evaluated? Why should we prefer the state of non-existence because of its higher comparative value if a different state has a higher *intrinsic*

value?[19] And wouldn't it be better to raise the absolute, intrinsic prudential value rather than the comparative prudential value, given that the latter is not determined by the former? Loosening the interdependence of intrinsic and comparative prudential value makes these questions *non-trivial.* One gets the impression that rather than offering an *explanation* for a moral asymmetry, such an axiological asymmetry concerning comparative value renders comparative value *irrelevant* to morals.

I conclude that DP3 cannot be denied without heavy costs. The argument is sound.

5 The Chain Reaction Argument

The two previous arguments already speak heavily against the Asymmetry Thesis in particular and the comparative evaluation of two states in terms of two different modes of comparison in general. In this section, I present a third argument that broadens the picture: If it is successful, the Chain Reaction Argument shows that using two different modes for comparative prudential evaluations, as implied by the Asymmetry Thesis, leads to unacceptable axiological consequences for chains of procreation, where additional lives are added one after another, rather than simultaneously. I think it will help highlight the problems with Benatar's account and point out relevant considerations that must guide *any* theory of the relation between intrinsic and comparative prudential value. It also has bearing on the ethics of procreation, as it suggests that asymmetrical accounts of comparative prudential value imply that in some constellations one can justify discounting of the interests of an arbitrarily large number of descendants.

Benatar grants that, although coming into existence is always a harm for the one coming into existence, it can be a benefit for somebody else who already exists. It is plausible that it is *possible* that these benefits are bigger than the other person's harm of coming into existence. For example, a person's coming into existence can bring loads of joy to an already existing person S0, while being only a very small harm for the person S1 itself, given its life contains only a little bit of pain (or other negative intrinsic prudential value). Since positive intrinsic prudential values for *already existing* people *do* count, according to Benatar, S1's coming into existence should be a net

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[19] Thus, Gardner (2016) argues that a life worth living is a benefit even if it is, strictly speaking, not *better* for the subject than non-existence.

good in this case, all things considered. This is quite plausible: The amount of harm coming into existence means for a person is dependent on the harm this person suffers in her life. For a person that already *does* exist, benefits can surely outweigh harms. For me, who already exists, it would be a good thing to feel the pain of a bee-sting for a minute if I'm rewarded with years of great pleasure. In the present case it's not an existing person's benefit that outweighs some of her own harm, but the harm of another person. But since there is no substantial difference between the harm of coming into existence and the harms an existing person is subject to (because the latter is derived from the first), there's no evident reason why it should be impossibly outweighed by a benefit that counts, namely: a benefit for an already existing person. The only way to block it would be to claim that inflicting harm to a person S1 can *never* be outweighed by the benefits it brings to another person S2, even if the harm is minimal and the benefits are maximal.

But if we allow this step, as I have argued we should, it seems that we can just repeat it over and over again: Now that S1 already came into existence, her benefits (for example her pleasures) *do* count and might, thus, outweigh the very little harm coming into existence might be for a third person S2's coming into existence. It now follows that we can create cases, where in an infinite chain of procreation every single case of coming into existence is a net good regarding the prudential good of everybody involved, although it is bad for every single one who comes into existence. The harm that coming into existence means for someone can be outweighed by the benefits it brings for someone else for whom it would *also* have been better not to have come into existence and for whom these benefits cannot compensate this bad of their own coming into existence This extremely strange result has the appearance of a contradiction: If the harm of one person's coming into existence is already done, an infinity of instances of coming into existence can be best in light of the interests of *all* persons involved, while every *single* person's coming into existence is bad for herself. If what is best for every single one were the case—i.e., if nobody came into existence—the benefits that outweigh the harm of coming into existence of the next person in the chain would not count at all, leaving nothing that speaks in favour of letting people come into existence.

So, it might seem as if the finite good for a single person, S0, outweighs the infinite bad that is done by bringing infinitely many people into existence in this scenario. But this would mean overlooking the temporal aspect in the scenario. It works only, because S0 triggers a chain reaction: Since S0's benefits count, because she already exists, they can justify the creation of a further

person, whose benefits will then count, too, and so on ad infinitum. Therefore, it is not the first person S0's benefits that outweigh the infinite bad. The harm that Sn's coming into existence is to Sn is outweighed by $S(n-1)$'s benefits. So, it is the benefits of an infinite number of persons that outweigh an infinite number of persons' harm of coming into existence, although nobody's benefits outweigh her own harm of coming into existence but only another person's one.

Note that this would not work, if the same people came into existence at the same time: In this case it would be a huge (in fact an infinite) net bad, because for the finite benefit of an already existing person infinitely many people would suffer the harm of coming into existence. Of course, it might be that a vast number of people have children at the same time and *in each case* the benefits to the parents and other existing people of the coming into existence of the child outweighs the harm to the child. But in this case we brought in many more already existing people to outweigh the alleged harm of simultaneous creation of offspring. But then, this is not a very hard bullet to bite. In case of the chain reaction case, the bullet *is* hard to bite, because a single person that already exists can trigger the stepwise outweighing of the next person's harms of infinitely many people.

The underlying problem is, again, the mathematics that Benatar proposes for the calculation of comparative prudential value in existence–nonexistence comparisons, based on his Asymmetry Thesis. More precisely, it's the resulting need for an application of two different modes of determining the comparative prudential value of a state: The pleasure-line does not count anymore if a state of non-existence is one part of our comparison, although it *does* count in existence–existence comparisons. To keep it easy, let us assign the same values to all lives in the infinite chain: The totality of S0's pleasure has the value 1, her pain has the value -1, and pleasure is augmented by 3 by procreation. The same value ascriptions apply to all future generations. S0 already exists. By creating S1 a pleasure that counts (since we compare one state of S0's existence with another state of S0's existence) is augmented by 3. For S1, at the same time, the harm of coming into existence is -1, since the pleasure-line does not count for her (since we compare one state of S1's existence with a S1's non-existence). If S1 doesn't come into existence, there is no negative intrinsic prudential value but a neutral one (or none at all). So, creating S1 brings more pleasure that counts ($+3$) than harm (-1). The problem is, as we can see, that by counting in already existing people when evaluating one person's coming into existence, we must calculate *with* the pleasure-line concerning these already existing people, while disregarding it concerning the person whose coming int existence we evaluate.

Let's look at such a chain of procreation with 1,000,000 instances with S0 already existing in the beginning at t0. The coming into existence of S1–S1,000,000 brings an advantage of +3 and a disadvantage of −1,000,000 for the people concerned. So, it's a net bad given the interests of all the people concerned that S1–S1,000,000 come into existence. However, that S1 comes into existence brings an advantage of +3 and a disadvantage of −1. So, it's good that S1 comes into existence. So, at t0 it would be best if S1 came into existence and S2–S1,000,000 didn't. At t1, however, S1 exists. The coming into existence of S2–S1,000,000 brings an advantage of +3 and a disadvantage of -999,999 for all the people concerned. So, it's a net bad that S2–S1,000,000 come into existence given the interests of all the people concerned. However, that S2 comes into existence brings an advantage of +3 and a disadvantage of −1. So, it's good that S2 comes into existence. So, at t1 it would be best, if S2 came into existence and S2–S1,000,000 didn't. Analogously, for any n at tn it would be best if S(n+1) came into existence and no further person did.

So, any instance of procreation is good (and even the best option) at the time at which it happens while, taken together, the instances of procreation are terribly bad. Just because they happen one after another arbitrarily positive instances can add up to an arbitrarily negative sum: We have a series of events (of procreation), e1, …, en. Any e is such that it's much better than non-e (in our example the comparative value is +2 for any e), judged based on the hedonic interests of all people who are involved. However, e1+…+en is much worse than non-e1+…+non-en (in our example, the value equals −1×n+3) judged based on the hedonic interests of the very same people. Thereby we get a new intransitivity: e1 is better than non-e1, e1+e2 is better than e1, e1+e2+…+en is better than e1+e2+…+e(n−1), but e1+e2+…+en is worse than non-e1. Moreover, the Asymmetry Thesis implies, accordingly, that it's possible that at some time t0 it's best that at any other time later than t0 what's best then does not happen.

To me it seems obvious that this result is unacceptable, therefore I want to present the following Chain Reaction Argument:

CP1: If the Asymmetry Thesis is true, it is possible that there is an arbitrarily long chain of events such that every event is comparatively arbitrarily good while all events taken together are comparatively arbitrarily bad, judged on the basis of the personal interests of the very same people.

CP2: It is not possible that there is an arbitrarily long chain of events such that every event is comparatively arbitrarily good while all events taken together are comparatively arbitrarily bad, judged on the basis of the personal interests of the very same people.

CC: The Asymmetry Thesis is not true.

The Chain Reaction Argument, as I presented it, is directed against Benatar's Asymmetry Thesis in particular. Yet, it can be raised against *any* theory that implies the axiological asymmetry that *negative* prudential value counts even in existence–nonexistence comparisons whereas *positive* prudential value counts only in existence–existence comparisons. Either, then, positive prudential value should count in *both* cases, too, or negative prudential value shouldn't count in existence–nonexistence cases, either. If there is an ethical asymmetry so that negative prudential value has more weight than positive prudential value when it comes to how we should act when facing a decision about procreation, this asymmetry requires a different explanation.

Conclusion

In this paper I argued that even a disambiguated version of Benatar's Asymmetry Thesis cannot be spelled out and explained in a coherent way and has, in the end, to be presented as an inexplicable brute fact. Being already weakened this way, it faces three further problems, all stemming from the distinction of two different modes of determining comparative prudential value that the Asymmetry Thesis implies: First, as Brown argued, it violates transitivity of the better-than relation and of the equally-good-as relation. Tightly connected to this, the Asymmetry Thesis implies that whether one state is prudentially better than another isn't determined by the intrinsic prudential values of these states. Thirdly, it allows for malignant chain reactions where the benefits of an already existing person justify the personal harm of further recreation, so that invariably good events add up to a potentially infinitely bad chain of events. If we take additionally into account that the main argument for the Asymmetry Thesis is under pressure because of doubts concerning the intuitive asymmetries on the one side and alternative explanations weakening the case for the abductive argument on the other, we have good reasons to reject it.

These results are important for the broader discussion of population ethics and the ethics of procreation. Any account of comparative prudential value must do justice to the challenges that

I presented: It must be alignable with some coherent view on the metaphysics of persons and their interests. Along the way we found one rather promising account that is actualist and employs a counterfactual mode of evaluation that allows us to assign a comparative prudential value to the lives of people in existence–nonexistence comparisons, albeit symmetrically. Second, any account of comparative prudential value should be compatible with the transitivity of the better than relation. It must, thirdly, be consistent with the claim that comparative prudential value supervenes on intrinsic prudential value. Fourthly, and finally, it must rule out malignant chain reactions where the discounting of the interests of future generations can be justified. This is only possible for a *symmetrical* account of comparative value. There are, in principle, three options at hand. First, we can accept that by creating happy people we realize a scenario that is comparatively good for them: It is prudentially better than the scenario in which they never come to exist. As I noted, this does not entail the claim that by not creating happy people we harm anybody by making them worse-off. Second, we can accept that by creating unhappy people we do not realize a scenario that is comparatively bad for them: It is not prudentially worse than the scenario in which they never come to exist. Third, we might reject that there *is* a comparative prudential value in existence–nonexistence comparisons. The latter two options are, of course, compatible with them being *bad off* instead of *worse-off*: they still have a net bad life that is not worth living.

Since comparative value judgements are crucial for choosing between two options, this axiological claim has direct ethical implications: To defend the view that there is an *ethical* asymmetry, we must loosen the ethical evaluation of a choice between *s1* and *s2* from the axiological evaluation of the *comparative prudential value* of each. If you are not willing to bite this bullet, you should in turn deny that there is an ethical asymmetry: Either we are not obliged not to create unhappy people or we are also obliged to create happy people.

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Acknowledgements

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