**Procreative asymmetry and replaceable animals**

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1. **Introduction**

According to the **Procreative Asymmetry**, we have strong moral reason to prevent miserable lives from coming into existence, but at best very weak moral reason to create happy lives:

1. If a future person would foreseeably have a life that is not worth living, this in itself gives us a strong moral reason to refrain from bringing this person into existence.
2. By contrast,there is no moral reason to create a person whose life would foreseeably be worth living, just because her life would be worth living. (Frick 2020)

Most of those who reject the ‘Asymmetry’ reject the second conjunct: we do have moral reasons to create new people whose lives would be worth livingbecause they would be worth living. Proponents of symmetry can be total utilitarians (‘totalists’), who believe that we always have decisive moral reason to do what makes the world go best, to produce the greatest possible net aggregate of well-being. Creating a new happy person, just like making an existing person happy, is a way of increasing well-being. The Asymmetry is also rejected by those who think we have moral reason to *benefit* people by bringing them into existence, whether or not we ought to increase total well-being.

While the Asymmetry is widely accepted, it has proven hard to vindicate convincingly. In what follows I will assume that it applies to sentient beings in general, not just persons. One puzzle for today is why it appears easier to motivate symmetrical reasons in the case of non-persons than persons—why, in other words, we seem much less reluctant to accept the replaceability of “merely sentient” animals but not that of persons (Singer 2011). According to the **Replaceability Argument**, animals are replaceable in a sense in which persons are not, a sense in which we *do* have moral reason to bring happy animals into existence just because they would be happy, and these reasons outweigh the reasons we have not to inflict certain harms on them. Key to the argument is that these happy animals would not exist if we did not allow ourselves to later kill them—animal husbandry is costly, so farmed animals’ lives depend on their marginal value on the market. **Replaceability thus presupposes the rejection of the Asymmetry**: we may permissibly breed and later painlessly kill happy animals if they would not have existed otherwise and replace them with equally happy animals. The argument is often used to motivate the permissibility of ‘humane animal farming’. In this paper, **I argue that this strategy backfires. Rejecting the Asymmetry leads to a different symmetry: the stronger the moral reason we have to create lives, the stronger the moral reason we have not to cut them short.** If we have moral reason to create happy lives, we have even more reason not to cut them short: their goodness contributes to explaining the harmfulness of death. Thus, appealing to the symmetry to support Replaceability places us in a sort of double bind: **breed happy animals (a good for them) to kill them, thereby inflicting on them a significant harm**—as we’ll see in discussion, whether one compensates for the other, within or across lives, is a sticking point in the framing of Replaceability. The worry is this: if death is a significant harm to animals, then it becomes increasingly difficult to justify replaceability for nonpersons but not for persons—a challenge that Peter Singer has grappled with through the successive editions of *Practical Ethics* (1979, 1993, 2011) before espousing hedonism and (more or less) biting the bullet (de Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014: Singer 2016; also see Hare 1999; Kagan 2016; Varner 2012).

In Section 2, I introduce the Replaceability Argument and unpack its assumptions. One of them is the topic of Section 3, the Procreative Asymmetry, where I draw on recent work to argue that the benefits of existence cannot be used to justify the premature killing of animals.

1. **Replaceability**
   1. **The Replaceability Argument**

The replaceability argument has generated much debate (Delon 2016; Višak and Garner 2016). Some early version of the Replaceability Argument can be traced at least back to Bentham (1907) [1789] and Stephen (1896). This “logic of the larder” was criticized by the early animal rights writer Henry Salt (1914), but consequentialists have frequently endorsed a version of the argument, as have many “conscientious omnivores” (see Delon 2016). Many people who condemn inflicting unnecessary suffering upon animals believe that the painless killing of animals is permissible; suffering and death are of different moral significance for most nonhuman animals.

Philosophers accepting the argument assume some version of two claims:

1. death is not a significant harm to animals;
2. existence is better than non-existence (for humanely raised animals, other sentient beings, and/or from the point of view of the universe).

In a slogan: ***we should not just breed happier animals but also more happy animals***. Either because the preferences of possible beings count or because the possibility of adding intrinsic value to the world generates sufficient reasons.

Hare considered the comparison of existence with non-existence very sensible: “happy existing people are certainly glad they exist, and so are presumably comparing their existence with a possible non-existence” (1999: 239). If he were given the choice between the life of a trout in a small farm in the English countryside, Hare would certainly “prefer the life, all told, of such a fish, to that of almost any fish in the wild, and to non-existence.” (240) It is better “for an animal to have a happy life, even if it is a short one, than no life at all.” Accordingly, “organic” (i.e., humane) animal agriculture is permissible, even required on marginal lands where crops cannot be grown (also see Crisp?, Belshaw?, Bruckner?).[[1]](#endnote-1)

* 1. **Assumptions and problems**

At the crux of the argument stand unresolved questions in moral theory, applied ethics and axiology (Višak and Garner 2016): When is death a harm? What is the relevant point of comparison to assess (momentary or lifetime) welfare? How does a short happy life compare with non-existence, life in the wild or a longer life? Complications abound, Parfit’s non-identity problem rearing its head with each comparison.

The application of the argument to non-persons but not persons turns on the assumption that death is normally distinctively bad for the latter if their lives are worth living. Death is a tragedy only for persons. The argument thus rests on two central distinctions: *suffering*/*death* and *persons/non-persons*, which explain why many people opposing animal suffering do not necessarily oppose the killing of animals for food, and why people who would consider killing human beings but for medical research horrific while condoning animal experimentation. In a way, Replaceability tells us that animals pay back the gift of life when they are killed; or that those are killed are paying it forward for those who will be born. Either way, replacement maintains a net positive balance of welfare.

Some utilitarian versions of the argument depend on the **crucial assumption that the interests of merely possible beings matter in some way**, not simply those of beings that do exist or will exist (regardless of one’s choices) (Hare 1993; 1999). Merely possible or “contingent” beings are those whose existence and identity depend on our choices (Roberts 2011). If interests matter only once one has determined that a being will exist, we cannot balance the interests of possible animals against their interests if they exist. **Comparativism**, the view, that we can compare the value of existence and non-existence (Hare 1975; 1993; 1999; Holtug 2001; Pummer 2019; Roberts 2003), allows (though it does not require) one to balance the interests of merely possible and actual animals.

Whether it is because existence is *better than* non-existence or the *intrinsic* good of existence generates strong enough moral reason to justify breeding happy beings, by turning to axiology, appealing to Comparativism can help us draw normative reasons from the value of possible lives.

According to one version of Comparativism, totalism, impartiality requires that one weigh the interests of actual (present and future) beings and possible beings equally, in proportion to their strength rather than whose interests they are. By contrast, *Non-comparativists* and critics of Replaceability counter that merely possible animals have no welfare so cannot be harmed or benefitted by existence or non-existence; their interests do not matter as much, if at all, as those of actual beings (Roberts 2011; Sapontzis 1987; Višak 2013; 2016). Even utilitarians, on this view, can avoid Replaceability⁠1. If existence is a benefit, it is a non-comparative one. If *existing* beings prefer their existence over non-existence, this does not entail that *merely possible* beings would prefer a short happy life to no life at all. If we assume that happy animals have an interest in continuing to live, independent of the benefit of existence, the question is whether this interest undermines Replaceability. Totalists can simply appeal to the net value of additional happy animals relative to the badness of their death; non-totalist comparativists must appeal to the intrinsic value of a good life and argue either that the disvalue of death is no more than the disvalue of nonexistence. Either way, premature death does not make a short life not worth living.

In the next section, I draw on recent criticisms and defenses of the Procreative Asymmetry, to argue that rejecting the latter cannot be used in support of Replaceability. Only a narrow, totalist view of our procreative duties allows it.

1. **The Procreative Asymmetry**
   1. **Defending the Asymmetry**

Let’s assume that being caused to exist with a life worth living can be good or bad for a being in a non-comparative sense (see e.g., Bykvist 2007; Harman 2004; McMahan 2013; Parfit 1984; Shiffrin 1999). Existence can be a harm or benefit even if it would not have been worse or better for them not to exist. McMahan calls these **“existential” benefits and harms**, in contrast with “ordinary” benefits and harms, “which are bestowed or inflicted on existing people, or on future individuals whose existence is independent of the act that causes or constitutes the benefit or harm.” (citation…) The general asymmetry between the strength of our reasons not to harm and that of our reasons to benefit cannot explain why, despite our generally weighty reasons to provide ordinary benefits to people, we lack strong if any moral reason to provide existential benefits. In rejecting the Asymmetry, we are denying that existential benefits for possible people cannot make moral claims on us like ordinary benefits for existing people.

Remember the two claims of the Asymmetry:

1. strong moral reason to refrain from creating miserable beings, yet
2. no moral reason to bring happy or very happy beings into existence rather than no beings at all.

These two claims appear to be in tension with the claim that

1. we have moral reason to bring happier rather than less happy beings into existence when given the choice (cite Parfit, Frick…).

As Johann Frick (2020) notes, as a *teleological* moral theory, totalism implies that “the appropriate response to what is good or valuable is to *promote* it, ensuring that as much of it exists as possible”. According to totalism, there is no morally significant distinction the degree to which one promotes intrinsic value between increasing value among *existing* bearers of value and creating *new* bearers of value. This thought underpins the rejection of the Asymmetry and the endorsement of Replaceability. For, if there are beings such that, when they are killed, the value destroyed by their death can be offset by creating new beings whose lives will instantiate at least as much value, such beings are replaceable without loss. Totalism entails that promoting intrinsic value is indifferent between the means of value promotion, because what is to be promoted are not particular objects or lives but abstract properties or states of affairs (well-being or happiness) (Frick 2020; Chappell 2015; Regan 1983,?; Singer 1993, 121). As the objection goes, totalism treats people and other beings as fungible **receptacles of welfare or value**. The moral importance of people and their lives is merely derivativeof their contribution to valuable states of affairs. As Singer vividly put it,

It is as if sentient beings are receptacles of something valuable and it does not matter if a receptacle gets broken, so long as there is another receptacle to which the contents can be transferred without any getting spilt. (Singer 1993, 121)

According to this objection, utilitarianism fails to treat us as distinct individuals with final value; rather it treats us as mere vehicles of value or fungible interest-promotion.

On what Chappell dubs ‘Utility Fundamentalism,’ sentient beings matter *because well-being matters*. But this appears fetishistic or perverse: well-being matters *because sentient beings matter*. Chappell proposes an alternative, ‘Welfarism,’ “according to which pleasure (say) is good precisely because it is good for the individual who experiences it, and suffering is bad because it is bad for the suffering individual”. Only the utility fundamentalist is “liable to the ‘value receptacle’ objection, understood as the failure to recognize that happiness (or whatever) is good just because it’s good for individuals.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Utilitarians need not “treat individual persons as constitutive means to the aggregate welfare, rather than as distinct ends in themselves” and can avoid thus avoid Replaceability. While the totalist and utility fundamentalist uphold replaceable lives as “(equally effective) mere means to a single final value” (= i.e., welfare), welfarists can appreciate the notion of “(equally-weighty) distinct final values” (welfare subjects as distinct targets of moral concern) (ibid.).

With this distinction in hand, the distinct kinds of value of merely possible and actual lives come into sharper focus. Consider now a notion introduced by Frick (2020). The reason-giving force of well-being is that of ***bearer-dependent reasons*: well-being matters conditional on the existence of bearers of value**. Frick writes, “our moral reasons to make S happy have their source in S, a being with moral status.” Merely possible beings are not yet and may not ever become bearers of moral status (or else they wouldn’t be *merely* possible, as opposed to actual future beings). Since the mere possibility of promoting value does not give us reasons to create new bearers *in order to realize value*, merely possible beings do not generate the sorts of reasons that actual beings generate. The value of their lives calls for a different *kind* of response than the justified responses to the final value of existing beings. Thus, ***whatever reasons we have to create happy animals are not symmetric to the reasons we have not to make them miserable***. For by creating miserable beings, we create bearers of moral status, who then generate reasons not to make them suffer. But beings we never create generate no such reasons since they do not exist. By failing to bring them into existence we do not act wrongly in the way that we do by bringing about net negative lives. Note that this is not to say there is *no* value in bringing about net positive lives, simply that reasons to do so are of a different kind.

**The existence of bearer-dependent reasons explains the second conjunct of the Asymmetry: no such reasons apply to the possibility of creating happy animals**. Conditional reasons cannot at the same time be reasons to make their conditions obtain. However, we do have **reasons to make welfare subjects if and once they exist, which explains the first conjunct of the Asymmetry**.

Frick accounts for the asymmetry between kinds of reasons by appealing to the notion of ***normative standard****.[[3]](#endnote-3)*⁠ Creating beings subjects us to standards regarding their well-being, grounded in their existence as bearers of moral status. By contrast, no such standard applies to outcomes in which those beings do not exist. The question is then, if living longer is in a being’s interest, ***do our reasons to make their lives better include reasons not to kill them prematurely according to the standards that apply to outcomes in which that being exists—namely, standards we can derive from procreative standards?*** Without reasons to confer existential benefits on merely possible beings and with reasons not to kill existing being, Replaceability would lack crucial support. On the idea that breeding animals entitles us to kill them, McMahan notes,

What is questionable here is the assumption that one can cause an individual to exist for purposes of one’s own without acquiring responsibilities. To cause an individual to exist in a vulnerable and dependent condition is arguably to make oneself liable to certain duties of care. (McMahan 2008, 7)

We may not have impartial duties to ensure that every sentient being lives as long as possible, but McMahan’s point is just a special case of a general thought: that we acquire responsibilities by creating lives. We don’t have moral reason to breed happy animals, but *if* we breed animals, we ought to make them happy. If, moreover, we would not farm animals if we could not kill them prematurely, and killing entails a violation of our duties, then we should ask: do we have “unconditional reasons”, as Frick (2020) would put it, *not* to breed them? Do we wrong them by killing them, if we benefited them by giving them happy lives they would not otherwise have had. Killing children is normally wrong regardless of how happy their lives have been, and that the positive value of their life normally doesn’t count in favor of but rather *against* killing them. Unless we presuppose that death doesn’t harm animals, or that special reasoning applies to children, it is difficult to accept replaceability for animals but not for children. Frick only argues that we have unconditionalreasons not to create beings whose life would *not be worth living*, which is not the case of happy animals. So the wrongness of killing does not entail that we should not create those animals. But it should give us pause. I hope to have conveyed the importance of drawing the distinction between the value of happy lives and the permissibility of cutting them short.

Since, however, the distinctiveness of bearer-dependent reasons does not entail the absence of any moral reasons to create happy lives, we must consider how weighty those reasons are.

* 1. **Putting pressure on the Asymmetry**

If we have moral reason to make the world a better place, it is sufficient to refute the Asymmetry that the following be true:

**Awesome Lives**: It is (intrinsically) good or desirable that awesome lives come to exist, where an ‘awesome’ life is one that exhibits a very high quality of life (Chappell 2017)

I agree with Chappell: “A world full of awesome, flourishing lives is (intuitively) better than a world that lacks these good lives.” And I agree that Awesome Lives is compatible with not having an *obligation* to procreate. Awesome Lives simply puts pressure on the strong version of the Asymmetry and is compatible with the claim that we have *weaker* reasons to create happy lives than not to create miserable lives. From the absence of obligation (deontic reasons) to procreate we cannot logically conclude that we lack (axiological) reasons to create more good lives. Chappell rightly notes that the intuitive character of the Asymmetry conceals a different, plausible asymmetry, the “procreative deontic asymmetry”, explained by the asymmetry in demandingness, as well as possible side-constraints, between a duty not to impose harm by creating miserable lives and a duty to bring good lives into existence. *If* we could create awesome lives without intruding in people’s reproductive lives, then “our intuitive attachment to the deontic asymmetry” would dissolve. Chappell considers the following case:

**A Distant Realm**: You learn that a new colony of awesome, happy, flourishing people will pop into existence in some distant, otherwise-inaccessible realm, unless you pluck and eat a particular apple.

We have good reason to refrain from plucking and eating the apple. The personal costs of refraining are so trivial in comparison to the great value of awesome lives. The Procreative Deontic Asymmetry “merely happens to be generally true in our particular circumstances.” Instead, Chappell argues that the appeal of the Asymmetry, and the plausibility of justified partiality toward actual people (see Roberts 2011), turns on a “**Deeper Intuition**” according to which the benefits to merely possible people count for less than benefits to those who are “antecedently actual”, namely those who do or will exist independently of our current choices.

But does Distant Realm support Replaceability? Are the costs of dying prematurely for a happy cow trivial in comparison to the value of the lives of future happy cows? Only if the marginal value of creating more farmed animals were very large and the costs of killing other farmed animals were negligible in comparison. But that is what is in question. *Even if* their lives were awesome and we had very strong moral reason to create them, it would not follow that no deontic asymmetry would apply. The disvalue of killing, even given replacement, could be strong enough to generate strong deontic reasons not to kill. Replaceability assumes that such deontic reasons are negligible or outweighed by axiological reasons to create more happy lives. This could be the case, for instance, if death only had *extrinsic* disvalue and no more so than nonexistence (I think Rhys will discuss this point). But this cannot be assumed as a matter of moral principle.

Is it permissible to create happy lives conditional on the predictably premature killing of sentient beings who may have an interest in living longer lives? Maybe, but the very permissibility of creation doesn’t entail the permissibility of killing. Awesome Lives are, after all, awesome, not the kind of life you want to cut short.

Chappell considers (but does not clearly endorse) two principles. The ***Principle of Partiality Toward the Antecedently Actual*** allows us to give greater weight to the interests of animals who do or will exist over the interests of those who could but need not exist. This means that the former’s interest in avoiding death could be much stronger than the latter’s interest in coming into existence. This accounts for a weakened version of the second conjunct of the Asymmetry.

Another principle, the ***Proscription of the Predictably Regrettable***, requires that we give full weight to the importance of preventing miserable lives, thus supporting the first conjunct of the Asymmetry. This principle sets specific constraints on partiality toward the actual: “discounting possible people’s interests in existence, but not their interests in non-existence.” (Preventable bad lives must be “weighted in full”.) In other words, it’s worse to inflict predictable suffering on people we bring into existence than not to bring potentially happy people into existence. Chappell denies that the principle is *ad hoc* (I’m not convinced but let’s assume he’s right). If we accept it, we get

**Weak Asymmetry***:* we have less reason to bring good lives into existence … than to prevent bad lives … (Chappell 2017)

Now, by breeding happy animals that we know we will kill prematurely, we are bringing into existence lives that we know we have strong reason not to end prematurely. The harm of death, it seems, is “predictably regrettable”; it’s a built-in feature of Replaceability. We are not failing to prevent bad lives, since these are happy animals, yet we are failing to prevent significant harms to actual beings. Putting the point differently, the asymmetric discounting implies that it takes much more happiness to justify a violation of the Proscription of the Predictably Regrettable than it would according to strict Comparativism. But here’s the catch: ***the more happiness, the more serious the harm of death***. Only if the harm of death is negligible can one avoid a violation of the Proscription. Granted, such a life may still be better than no life at all—after all, any life of sufficiently net positive welfare is, by definition, worth living. The normative question is whether that fact alone is sufficient to justify killing.

1. **Summing up**

We may, on impersonal grounds, have reasons to accept replaceability, but no principled way to avoid applying similar reasoning to persons. Even if we appeal to the claim that death harms people in a special way (a plausible claim), the axiological point stands: there are awesome *person* lives such that it would be better to create them even if that would entail cutting them short. My take on this is that our reasons to bring about impersonal benefits are typically weaker than our reasons not to inflict personal harms, let alone our reasons not to harm within the scope of procreative relationships. So, even if we have moral reason to create awesome lives, it doesn’t entail Replaceability.

The rejection of the Procreative Asymmetry plays a pivotal role in the Replaceability Argument. I have argued that the strategy backfires. Rejecting or weakening the asymmetry leads to a different symmetry:

**Reasons to let live**: the stronger our moral reasons to create lives, the stronger our moral reasons not to cut them short.

Reasons to Let Live applies to both deprivationism and preferentism about the harm of death. If we have moral reason to create awesome lives, we have even more reason not to bring a premature end to them, since their awesomeness contributes to explaining the harmfulness of their premature end. In brief, on deprivationism, the better the life, the worse it is to cut it short when more life would have been good. On preferentism, the better the life, the more one has reason to want to go on living, whether in terms of simple future-directed desires or categorical desires. *If* death can be a harm to animals, the explanation of the harm will, in general, also explain why it is worse to cut a happier life short than a less happy life. If a longer happy life *is* an option for happy farmed animals, death harms them even if their life is better than no life at all. If it is *not* an option, proponents of replaceability have built necessary harms into happy lives. Whether it is, all things considered, wrong to inflict such harms is another question, but it’s natural to think that, for persons as well as non-persons, the significance of such harms creates a presumption against inflicting them. If I am correct, the reasons we already have to think death can harm animals are amplified, rather than cancelled, by the benefits bestowed by being brought into existence.

1. Singer (2011: Ch. 5) now accepts that a good if short life is better than non-existence. Sentient life even has a preference-independent (objective) value, such that more good lives is better than either a less happy or a non-sentient universe. These claims are even easier for Singer to accept now that he espouses *hedonistic* act-utilitarianism (Lazari-Radek and Singer 2014): the permissibility of a given act of killing depends on the overall resulting balance of enjoyment and suffering. On this view, persons are also replaceable, although, given the richness of their lives and the numerous side effects, not as easily as merely sentient beings (also see Varner 2012). With all that said, consequentialists or utilitarians need not accept Replaceability (John and Sebo 2021; Višak 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Whether totalists must endorse Utility Fundamentalism, notwithstanding that most of them do, is a question I leave aside here. Nothing in my argument hangs on this. What matters is that the same presuppositions underlying the totalist endorsement of symmetrism appear to support the utilitarian endorsement of Replaceability. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Frick writes, “a criterion of evaluation that applies to those outcomes of an agent’s actions that fall within the scope of the standard. … The scope of the standard is coextensive with those outcomes in which its ground ever exists. If the ground never exists in some outcome, the standard does not apply to that outcome, and consequently we can have no standard-regarding reasons against bringing it about.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)