

THE PROCREATION ASYMMETRY DESTABILIZED: ANALOGS AND ACTING FOR PEOPLE'S SAKE

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ABSTRACT: Is there a pro tanto moral reason to create a life merely because it would be good for the person living it? Proponents of the procreation asymmetry claim there is not. Defending this controversial no reason claim, some have suggested that it is well in line with other phenomena in the moral realm: there is no reason to give a promise merely because one would keep it, and there is no reason to procreate merely to increase the extent of justice in the world. Allegedly, some analogs extend so far as to support a unified theory of the no reason claim and the nonidentity thesis, that is, the view that of two persons leading lives of positive wellbeing, there is a reason to create the person with higher wellbeing. I dismantle the proposed analogs and show that they fail to meet various desiderata. Moreover, I refute Johann Frick's argument that the no reason claim follows from the assumption that reasons of beneficence are reasons to act for the sake of people. By criticizing attractive defenses for the no reason claim, I weaken its plausibility.

Is there a pro tanto moral reason¹ to create a life merely because it would be good for the person living it? Proponents of the *procreation asymmetry* claim there is not. Defending this controversial *no reason claim*, some have pointed out that it is well in line with other phenomena in the moral realm: there

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¹ In this paper, "moral reasons" and "reasons" refer to pro tanto moral reasons.

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is no reason to give a promise merely because one would keep it, and there is no reason to procreate merely to increase the extent of justice in the world (Narveson 1967; Frick 2020). Allegedly, some analogs extend so far as to support a unified theory of the no reason claim and the *nonidentity thesis*, that is, the view that of two persons leading lives of positive wellbeing, there is reason to create the person with higher wellbeing. I dismantle the proposed analogs and show that they fail to meet various desiderata. Moreover, I refute Johann Frick's (2020) argument that the no reason claim follows from the assumption that reasons of beneficence are reasons to act for the sake of people. By criticizing attractive defenses for the no reason claim, I weaken its plausibility.

Section 1 introduces the puzzle of the procreation asymmetry. Section 2 outlines two desiderata that analogs of the procreation asymmetry might seem to fulfil. Section 3 presents the strongest theory drawing on these analogs: Frick's (2020) elaborate conditional reason account. The following sections dismantle the analogs, showing that both desiderata are missed. Section 4 argues that Frick's attempt to provide a unified theory of the procreation asymmetry and the nonidentity thesis does not succeed. Section 5 argues that analogs like promising do not provide evidence favoring the no reason claim. Section 6 argues that analogs to the no reason claim that involve procreation, such as the analog of justice, do not provide such contrastive evidence either. Section 7 refutes Frick's argument that the no reason claim follows from the assumption that procreative reasons are reasons to act for the sake of people.

1. THE PUZZLE

Let me start by presenting the puzzle of the procreation asymmetry. Consider an existing life that, without your interference, will be *neutral* in terms of lifetime wellbeing: the things that are good for the person living the life will be in balance with the things that are bad for that person. Imagine you could add some terrible things to that person's life, making it overall bad for her, or, as I shall sometimes call it, *miserable*. Should you? In this scenario, many agree that

- (–) the fact that the neutral life would become bad for the person living it, gives us, by itself, a moral reason not to change it.

In contrast, suppose you could shift the balance of wellbeing to the positive by adding some awesome things to a life that would otherwise be

neutral. Life would become good for the person living it, or, as I shall sometimes call it, *happy*.² Here, many agree that

(+) the fact that the neutral life would become good for the person living it, gives us, by itself, a moral reason to change it.

Perhaps the moral reason *not* to change a neutral life into a miserable life is stronger than the reason to change a neutral life into a happy life. Yet, in both cases, there is a clear moral reason. Call this the *change symmetry*. In contrast, consider procreation. Many find the following asymmetry of reasons intuitive (see Narveson 1967, 1973; Roberts 2011a):

(–) the fact that a life would be bad for the person living it gives us, by itself, a moral reason not to create it, while

(+) the fact that a life would be good for the person living it gives us, by itself, no moral reason to create it.

Strikingly, the (+) half of the procreation asymmetry states that there is no moral reason whatsoever to bring a life into existence just because it would be good for the person living that life. I call this the *no reason claim*. In contrast, the mere fact that a life would be miserable does give you a reason against creating it. Intuitively, it is similarly strong as the reason not to turn an existing, otherwise neutral life into a miserable life (Frick 2020, 57). With this in mind, the no reason claim seems peculiar.

Here is one way to formulate the puzzle: Why is there no reason to create a life that would be good for someone if the alternative is not to add anything good for anyone? Metaphorically speaking: Why not plant a beautiful flower where otherwise there would be nothing?

The puzzle increases if one considers the following *nonidentity choice*. Suppose you could either

- (a) create a person with a happy life (e.g., a life that lasts twenty happy years),
- or
- (b) create a different person with a happier life (e.g., a life that lasts sixty happy years).

When it comes to this choice, many find the *nonidentity thesis* intuitive: you have a moral reason to create the happier life (b) rather than the less happy life (a), all other things being equal (Parfit 1984; but see Boonin 2014). On the one hand, then, one has a reason to create the happier of two happy

² This terminological choice is merely stylistic. I do not equate happiness and wellbeing.

lives. On the other hand, according to the procreation asymmetry, one has no moral reason to create a happy life rather than create no additional life at all. How can one justify this conjunction?

2. TWO DESIDERATA

To be clear, the two halves of the procreation asymmetry, the change symmetry, and the nonidentity thesis do not logically contradict one another. For example, the thesis that there is a reason to change an existing, otherwise neutral life into a happy life is consistent with the thesis that there is no reason to create a happy life. Accordingly, one can easily devise consistent ad hoc principles that do little more than restate these theses.

What has proven difficult, however, is to make sense of these seemingly disparate theses by integrating them into a more satisfactory theory. Various theories already fail to accommodate both halves of the procreation asymmetry. For example, if you endorse presentism—the view that only the wellbeing of presently existing people matters, but not the wellbeing of future people—then you can explain the *no reason claim*. But you cannot explain the (–) half of the procreation asymmetry, the claim that you have a reason not to create a life just because it would be miserable. If, by contrast, you agree with total utilitarianism that one has reason to maximize total wellbeing, then you can explain the (–) half of the procreation asymmetry. You cannot, however, explain the no reason claim. Instead, you end up with a *symmetry theory* about procreation. According to symmetry theories of procreation, there are both reasons against creating miserable lives and in favor of creating happy lives.

One way to explain both halves of the procreation asymmetry is via the assumption that we only have moral reasons to avoid what would be worse, or bad, for some particular person but no symmetric reasons to ensure what would be good, or better, for some particular person.³ If you created a miserable life, then that would be bad for the person living it. By contrast, if you did not create an additional happy life, then this would not be bad, or worse, for anyone. Hence the no reason claim. This approach also accommodates the change symmetry. Consider that if you do not turn an already existing, otherwise neutral life into a happy life, someone has a worse life as a result. But the approach fails to accommodate the

³ For approaches along these lines, see Parfit (1984, 526), Roberts (2011b), McDermott (2019), and Horton (2021).

nonidentity thesis (Parfit 1984, 395)⁴: If you created the happy life that is less happy, no person would live a life that is overall bad or that is worse for that person than in the alternative. After all, this person would not even exist in the alternative option.

Many assume there is a reflective equilibrium between our theories and our more specific judgments. Without a satisfactory theory, the no reason claim stands on shaky ground. More precisely, it has proven difficult for theories of the procreation asymmetry to fulfill the following desiderata. First, as has already emerged from what I have said, a theory of the asymmetry should accommodate the nonidentity thesis in a non-ad-hoc way.

Non-Ad-Hocness Regarding the Nonidentity Thesis: the theory accommodates the nonidentity thesis in a non-ad-hoc way.

Second, a theory should answer what I call the objection from symmetry: the intuitiveness of the no reason claim aside, is there any evidence that procreative reasons are asymmetric rather than symmetric?⁵ In other words, a theory should have contrastive evidence.

Contrastive Evidence: evidence (besides the intuitiveness of the no reason claim) that favours asymmetry theories of procreation over symmetry theories of procreation.

Contrastive evidence is particularly important because the asymmetry intuition itself is not universally shared. Instead, some find the reason claim intuitive: there is a reason to create a happy life just because it would be happy (Chappell 2017; Rürger 2020; see also Algander 2012).⁶

Various proponents of the procreation asymmetry explicitly acknowledge the lack of contrastive evidence (see e.g. Roberts 2011b, 365). Frick's (2020) excellent recent paper makes an exciting claim to deliver it. He sketches an argument that I call *the argument for the sake of people*. If our reasons of beneficence and nonmaleficence are reasons to act for the sake of people, then the no reason claim follows because we cannot

⁴ Roberts (2015) ultimately concedes that her approach fails to accommodate intuitions about various nonidentity cases, such as Parfit's *Two Medical Programmes* (Parfit 1984, 367). Horton (2021) accepts denying the nonidentity thesis as a feature of his account.

⁵ This might differ slightly from what Frick (2020) calls the objection from symmetry.

⁶ By means of an experimental study, Dean Spears (2020) tries to cast doubt on the view that the asymmetry intuition is widely shared. He arrives at a surprising result: nearly three-quarters of participants report that there are reasons to create people just because these people would be happy. Because of various confounding factors in Spears's study, however, I think these results are invalid (Aaron, forthcoming).

create happy people for their sake. At the same time, Frick claims, the (–) half of the asymmetry is not in danger: we have reasons to avoid creating miserable people for their sake. I will reject this argument in Section 7.

Moreover, Frick draws our attention to various analogs of the no reason claim. According to the no reason claim, there is no reason to create a person merely because she would be happy. By contrast, there are reasons to make existing people happy. This, he argues, mirrors our intuitions about the value of justice. Already existing people, he suggests, have moral reasons to treat one another justly. But “it would plainly be absurd to think . . . that we could have moral reason to create new persons *just in order* that they may treat one another justly” (66). Frick suggests that other values like “liberty, equality, fairness, honesty, fidelity, loyalty, . . . health, safety” provide more analogs to the no reason claim (66). Although the precise argumentative weight he attaches to these analogs is not clear,⁷ I take it that, at first sight, the gap between existing just lives and the creation of new just lives seems to make the parallel gap in the case of wellbeing much less puzzling. It seems to provide contrastive evidence. On the one hand, the analogs are well in line with an endorsement of the no reason claim, and, indeed, Frick will subsume both under a common explanation. On the other hand, the analogs seem hard to square with a symmetry theory of procreation: how could a symmetric theory, according to which there is a reason to create lives merely because they would be happy, explain why it is “plainly absurd” to promote justice by setting more just lives into the world?

Moreover, Frick argues that there are analogs to the conjunction of the procreation asymmetry and the nonidentity thesis. As Jan Narveson (1967) suggested, there is a *promising asymmetry* that resembles the procreation asymmetry:

- (–) the fact that one would break a promise generates a moral reason not to give it, while
- (+) the fact that one would keep a promise generates no moral reason to give it.

⁷ On my reading, Frick suggests that (1) the gap between changing *existing* lives and *procreation* in the case of justice is parallel to that in the case of wellbeing, and (2) a teleological view about justice (and other values) would leave us with the absurd conclusion that we have to create people merely because they would treat each other justly. I shall criticize both claims. Although I grant that a weaker reading is possible, I take it that his article at least raises the interesting question whether these analogs provide contrastive evidence or not.

In addition, Frick claims that if you could give either of two promises that you would fulfil, then you have a moral reason to give the promise you would fulfil to a higher degree even if you have no moral reason to give any promise rather than none (Frick 2020, 87). This seems to mirror the conjunction of the procreation asymmetry and the nonidentity thesis. Drawing on such analogs, Frick claims to offer a well-connected theory for both, fulfilling the desideratum of providing a non-ad-hoc explanation for the nonidentity thesis.⁸ The next section sketches how this superior asymmetry theory might look.

3. AN ACCOUNT IN TERMS OF CONDITIONAL REASONS

Frick holds that the common element in the procreation asymmetry and the promising asymmetry are *claims*. Existence, according to Frick, comes along with specific moral claims, for example, a claim to *beneficence*. Therefore, creating a person generates a new claim to beneficence—just like giving a promise creates a new claim that the promise will be kept. We have reason to satisfy people's claims.

Importantly, Frick argues that our moral reasons are, first and foremost, *conditional* reasons (see also Narveson 1967, 1973). I will soon disambiguate this notion. For now, here is a rough presentation. Conditional reasons depend on the obtaining of certain conditions, in particular, on claims being created⁹: *If* one gives a promise, one has reason to fulfil the promise; *if* one creates a person, one has a reason to make her happy. Since there is only a reason to make her happy on the condition that she exists, the no reason claim follows: if the person does not exist, the condition does not obtain. Similarly, if a promise is not given, there is no reason to create the promise merely because one would fulfil it.

But how can one account for the negative halves of the procreation asymmetry and the promising asymmetry? Why is there a reason not to create a miserable life—given that the condition upon which one has reason to make it happy does not yet obtain? In other words: How can we derive an unconditional reason from a conditional reason?

⁸ Note that offering a *unified* theory for the procreation asymmetry and the nonidentity thesis is not the only way in which one could fulfil the requirement of non-ad-hocness.

⁹ Frick employs the wider notion of a *standard*. This is of no importance for the purposes of this article.

To understand Frick's answers, we must distinguish two concepts of conditional reason (see Frick 2020, 73–75). First, there are *narrow-scope conditional reasons* of the form

If I do p , then I have reason to do q .

More specifically: if I bring about a claim, then I have reason to fulfil it.

Prima facie, the concept of a narrow-scope conditional reason seems to match our everyday understanding of promises. However, from a narrow-scope conditional reason, nothing follows (without further principles) regarding the creation of claims. One could stipulate a *reason creation asymmetry* that might have some intuitive appeal:

(–) one has a reason not to create reasons one would fail to act on, but

(+) one has no reason to create reasons one would act on.

Such an account, however, faces at least two problems. First, the reason creation asymmetry requires further justification. Second, according to some views, you do not have a moral reason to do q if doing q is impossible for you (Streumer 2018). On this assumption, you do not have a narrow-scope conditional reason to make a person happy that you could not, by any means, make happy. Therefore, even granting the reason creation asymmetry, you could not derive an unconditional reason against creating such a miserable life (see Singer 1976, 92). But, certainly, you have a pro tanto reason not to create a child that you could not possibly make happy because it would suffer from terrible, incurable pain. Without further defense, a narrow-scope conditional reason would leave us with a *symmetric no reason view*: there is no reason to create a happy life and no reason to avoid certain miserable lives either.

To explain the procreation asymmetry, Frick employs an alternative construal of conditional reasons. He calls them *wide-scope conditional reasons*. They are reasons to make a material implication true (for a related account in terms of conditional duties, see Narveson 1967).

I have reason to make it the case that (if I do p , then I do q).

More specifically: I have reason to ensure that (if I create a claim, then I fulfil it).

How does an unconditional reason not to create a miserable life follow from this? Consider that this conditional reason is, in a sense, an *unconditional* reason to make a material implication true: the reason

operator does not follow the antecedent but precedes the entire implication.¹⁰ Assume that the consequent [I do q] would be false: I would break the promise or fail to make a person happy. Then the only way to make the conditional true is to ensure that the antecedent [I do p] is false by not creating the claim in the first place. Along these lines, one can derive an unconditional reason not to create a claim from the unconditional reason to make a material implication true. By contrast, no reason to create a claim one would fulfil can be derived. If no claim is created, then the conditional is true, irrespective of the consequent. Simplifying, we can say that a wide-scope conditional reason implies an asymmetry because there are several ways to make a conditional true but only one way to make it false. For technical details see Frick (2020, 73–75) and Greenspan (1975).¹¹ Thus, one can subsume both the procreation asymmetry and the promising asymmetry under a general explanation by proposing that both involve wide-scope conditional reasons.

Here is an informal summary of Frick's account. We were puzzled by why there is no reason to add something good for someone where otherwise there would be nothing good for anyone, as one might wonder why not to plant a beautiful flower where otherwise there would be bare soil. Frick asks us to leave behind the teleological perspective that gives rise to our puzzlement. From this perspective, the proper response to value is to promote it, and the proper response to disvalue is to prevent it (Berker 2013, 343–44; Frick 2020, 63). Frick invites us to look at the additional life from a different angle: the angle of claims. Metaphorically speaking, think of the additional life as a chain that binds you. If you know that you would not live within the bounds of the chain—that you would break your chains—you have a reason not to get chained in the first place. By contrast, the mere fact that you would live within its bounds does not give you a reason to get chained

¹⁰ In this context, it is important to bear in mind that the material implication is merely one analysis of conditional statements. Therefore, the intuitiveness of conditional statements such as “You have reason to ensure that you keep a promise if you give it” need not support Frick's account in terms of material implications. One oddity of the analysis in terms of material implications is that you can satisfy *your reason to ensure that (you keep a promise if you give it)* by not giving a promise. Against this view, one might object that, intuitively, *reasons to ensure that (you keep a promise if you give it)* are only operant if the promise is given. For a related criticism of analyzing conditional desires in terms of material conditionals, see McDaniel and Bradley (2008).

¹¹ The derivation of the unconditional reason is not trivial. Frick and Greenspan introduce and justify new operators. One problem is that they only show how an unconditional reason can be derived if it is *unalterably true* that a claim would be violated. But one might argue that the asymmetry should hold not only if it is *unalterably true* that one would violate a claim but, more generally, if it is *foreseeably true* that a claim would be violated.

up. From this angle, the procreation asymmetry is no longer puzzling. In a nutshell, Frick tries to defuse our puzzlement about the procreation asymmetry by replacing a teleological outlook, on which there is unconditional reason to promote the value of wellbeing, with a nonteleological outlook in which our moral reasons derive from claims.

How does Frick explain the nonidentity thesis that, of two nonidentical happy persons, you have reason to create the happier person? Since both lives are happy, both satisfy the claim to happiness of the persons living them. No matter which life one creates, no claim gets violated. However, according to Frick, the happier life satisfies the claim to a happy life to a *higher degree*. Based on this distinction, Frick explains the nonidentity thesis by proposing something like the

Higher-Satisfaction Principle: when deciding whether to create one of two claims of the same kind, and either claim would get satisfied, and all else is equal, one has moral reason to choose the claim that is satisfied to a higher degree, even if the claims would be held by different persons (see Frick 2020, 77–81).

At first sight, the higher-satisfaction principle might seem close to simply restating the verdicts in the nonidentity choice (see section 1) and the procreation asymmetry. But it replaces the creation of people with the more general creation of claims. Thus, cases beyond procreation can back it up and save it from the charge of being ad hoc.

Here is Frick's most detailed example. If you employ someone, you give that person a claim to adequate compensation. Just as a happy life can be more or less happy, Frick argues that a payment that is overall adequate and, hence, satisfies the claim to adequate compensation can be adequate in higher or lower degrees. Suppose you could employ, with the same money, one of two persons. Due to the high income tax rate in her country, one candidate would receive only a "small fraction of the wages" you pay (Frick 2020, 80). Her wage, although adequate, would be lower than the other candidate's wage. The higher wage would be *more* adequate. All else equal, it is intuitive—Frick holds—that you ought to employ the person receiving the higher wage. At the same time, no reason derives from considerations of adequate compensation to employ anyone rather than none. We seem to get a neat parallel to the conjunction of the nonidentity thesis and the procreation asymmetry, providing support for the higher-satisfaction principle. This is so, Frick suggests, even if we assume that the amount of good done would be the same in either case (87).

4. THE CONJUNCTION OF NONIDENTITY THESIS AND NO REASON CLAIM

This section examines the analogs to the conjunction of the nonidentity thesis and the no reason claim, arguing that they fail to fulfil the desideratum of non-ad-hocness.

Let me return to the employment example. Why does Frick ask us to suppose that the amount of good done is the same in either option? Without this assumption, our verdict might be due to something other than the higher-satisfaction principle, which concerns only the *degree of satisfaction of claims not yet created*. According to Frick's nonteleological theory, it might be due to *already existing* claims for beneficence. To illustrate, imagine you could benefit an existing person by signing a document, at no cost to yourself, and no other ethical considerations apply. Here, you have a reason to sign the document. Within his framework, Frick can deal with such cases by endorsing

Beneficence in the light of existing claims: given *existing* people's claims to beneficence, you have a pro tanto moral reason to create an additional benefit for existing people (see Frick 2014, 51–52).

This principle also generates reasons in employment decisions. Imagine that you have decided to employ someone. You could employ either a person for whom the money would be of no benefit, or—at no additional cost—a person for whom you know the money would do a great amount of good because she urgently needs to provide for her family. You have a moral reason to prefer the second candidate over the first, deriving, in Frick's view, from existing claims to beneficence.

To establish that the verdict in his employment case does not just derive from people's existing claims to beneficence but from the higher degree of satisfaction of the claims to be created, Frick assumes that both options achieve the same amount of good. As a result, the higher-satisfaction principle is supported by independent evidence, secure from the charge of being ad hoc.

Moreover, the assumption that people are benefitted equally in both options also rules out that the verdict to employ the worker with the higher net income can be explained by a teleological view about wellbeing. Recall that, according to Frick, this outlook is at the root of symmetry theories of procreation.

However, as I shall argue, the assumption that people are benefitted the same in both options dissolves the intuition that one has reason to

prefer the candidate with the higher net income. At first glance, one might agree with Frick's verdict about the employment case. But on reflection, it turns out that this is due to confounding factors in the way the case is framed. For instance, the reason why you intuitively prefer the worker receiving the higher income might be that you do not want to support a state with a tax regime so greedy that it makes the worker receive, as Frick writes, only a "small fraction of the wages" you pay (Frick 2020, 80).

If we eliminate this factor and really try to imagine that the amount of good done is the same, the intuition dissolves. Imagine that the higher taxes are not greedy but are well invested. Do you still share the intuition that you ought to prefer the more adequately paid worker over the adequately paid one? Tax aversion apart, one reason why you might share it is that more of your money would go to an identified person: your employee. In the other option, more of your money would go to faceless, statistical people.

To eliminate this contamination, consider the following, more specific case. You need a freelance graphic designer for a one-time project. One designer would receive \$4,000 from your payment. This would be neither in the range of inadequate payments, nor in the range (if there is such a thing) where payments are neither adequate nor inadequate; it would be *just* above these ranges and clearly be an adequate payment.¹² The other designer, due to a lower income tax, would receive \$5,000. This wage is also in the range of clearly adequate payments, but it is higher than *just* adequate. Thus, both would be adequate payments, but one would be higher. Frick, I take it, would assume that the second designer would be *more adequately* paid.

Assume you happen to know that both designers would buy the same computer from their one-time wage. In the country with the higher income tax, it costs \$2,000. In the country with the higher wages, it costs \$3,000 because of an import tax on computers. This product apart, the currency has the same average buying power in both countries. In this case, then, ought you to employ the graphic designer who receives the higher wage? You would pay her more adequately, but it is plausible to assume that no additional good would result from this. In my experience, people judge that it does not matter whom you employ.

¹² It is important to specify that even the lower payment is clearly adequate. Otherwise, one might explain the intuitive difference by worries that the lower payment is not, in fact, adequate, and therefore does not meet the claim to adequate payment at all.

Accordingly, the teleological symmetry theory, on which there is unconditional reason to promote the good, can explain the intuitive verdict in this case without any further principles: you do not have a reason to prefer one worker over the other, for the amount of good done is the same.

Worse still: on the assumption that the worker whose payment is higher than just adequate is also paid “more adequately,” the employment example actually backfires. Originally devised to support the higher-satisfaction principle, the employment example, once it is spelled out, amounts to a *counterexample* against this principle. For according to the higher-satisfaction principle, we *do* have a reason to prefer one graphic designer over the other. This contradicts the intuitive verdict.

One might avoid falsification through the employment case by claiming that the considerably higher payment, although *higher* than just adequate is not, in fact, *more adequate*.

But here we must distinguish different arguments why the higher payment is not more adequate. First, one might object that \$1,000 just is not enough to make a difference between a more and less adequate payment. Against this objection, my reply is that the indifference intuition remains, even if one adjusts the example for higher amounts of money.

Second, one might argue that it is simply impossible that one clearly satisfied claim is more satisfied than another clearly satisfied claim. There is nothing beyond satisfaction, as it were. If so, then the employment case does not *contradict* the higher-satisfaction principle. But consider that, on this view, once the claim to happiness is clearly fulfilled, it cannot be fulfilled to a higher degree than another such clearly satisfied claim. But Frick’s entire approach to the nonidentity thesis was based on the very assumption that the satisfied claim to a happy life can be more satisfied than another clearly satisfied claim to a happy life.

Third, one might propose the more restricted thesis that it is merely impossible that a claim *to adequate compensation* is more satisfied than another such clearly satisfied claim. On this assumption, falsification can be avoided. But this view does not get us further when it comes to presenting examples that support the higher-satisfaction principle. On this view, my argument turns into a challenge: to identify alternative examples that could support the higher-satisfaction principle. Frick tries to give some other examples, such as fulfilling promises in various degrees. But my criticism can be repeated for those. Upon this realization, I think that any *prima facie* appeal of the higher-satisfaction principle is lost. Thus, even if falsification can be avoided, the charge of being *ad hoc* remains.

The higher-satisfaction principle was Frick's attempt to accommodate the nonidentity thesis in a fashion that naturally coheres with his explanation of the no reason claim. The guiding idea was that in both cases, it is not the amount of good done that matters, but considerations about claim satisfaction. If this idea could have been backed up, it might have alleviated our puzzlement about the no reason claim: Why is there no reason to create something good for someone if the alternative is not to create anything good for anyone? But this unified theory has proven unsupported, if not falsified, by the employment case.

The remaining sections argue that various candidates for contrastive evidence are unsatisfactory. We will end up with a theory that fulfils neither desideratum.

5. THE PROMISING ASYMMETRY

This section considers proposed analogs to the procreation asymmetry that do not involve procreation. I argue that they give no contrastive evidence for an asymmetry theory of procreation.

Recall the importance of contrastive evidence. The riddle of the procreation asymmetry was: why not create a life that is good for the person living it—if the alternative would be to create nothing good for anyone? Metaphorically speaking: why not plant a beautiful flower where otherwise there would be nothing? The proposed reply: we should not look at the matter from the teleological perspective from which the proper response to value is to promote it. Instead, look at the new life from a different angle: think of it as a chain that binds you. If you know that you would live within its bounds, then this does not give you a reason to get chained up. But here is the critical question: why should we look at it *in this way*, and not (also) *in the other*?

It might seem that the promising asymmetry supports this picture. It seems that, from a teleological perspective, we would have to assume that the proper response to the value of promise-keeping is to promote it, and hence would end up with the absurd conclusion that we have reason to make as many promises as possible. Such a conclusion would give us reason to leave behind the teleological outlook, and the puzzle of the procreation asymmetry would disappear.

In what follows, however, I shall argue that the promising asymmetry does not pose such trouble for the teleological outlook. The key point is that there is an axiological disanalogy between creating happy lives and creating promises one would keep: while creating an additional happy life adds something that is good for someone, creating an additional promise—in the

cases where there is no reason to do so—produces no additional good. The following subsections clarify this argument.

5.1. *The Promising Asymmetry is Tied to an Axiological Asymmetry*

This subsection argues that promising asymmetry is bound up with an axiological asymmetry on one level or another. When the promising asymmetry holds, (i.e., when there are no pro tanto reasons to give a promise because one would keep it but reasons against giving a promise because one would not keep it), there is also an *axiological promising asymmetry*.

The Axiological Promising Asymmetry:

- (−) giving-and-breaking the promise is of disvalue, whereas
- (+) giving-and-keeping the promise is of zero value.

As an illustration, suppose you are foreseeably going to bring cookies for your friend. You can either bring them without announcing it or promise beforehand that you will bring cookies. Plausibly, under many circumstances, neither option will produce more good than the other. Unless you assume that giving-and-keeping a promise is itself of positive value, the teleological view that the proper response to value is to promote it does not imply reasons to create new promises merely because one would keep them.

One might object that if you keep the promise to your friend and bring her cookies, then she will be *glad* that you have kept it. This, it might seem, indicates that promise-keeping is valuable. But we must distinguish between different respects in which you might be glad. In our example, there is no reason to be glad about the promise being-given-and-satisfied instead of receiving the cookies just like that, and this was the choice with which we were concerned: only regarding this choice was there no pro tanto reason to prefer one option over the other.¹³

To be sure, sometimes giving-and-keeping a promise might produce additional good. Suppose the only option to lighten up your friend's terrible morning would be to promise her that you will come to see her in the

¹³ Accordingly, the promising asymmetry cannot be used to provide contrastive evidence for the alternative asymmetry theory according to which (+) the fact that a person would have a complaint against our choice gives us, by itself, a moral reason not to make the choice, while (−) the fact that a person would be glad about our choice gives us, by itself, no moral reason to make it (see Horton 2021; Greenspan 2005). For giving-and-keeping the promise does not generate gladness with respect to the relevant alternative of not giving the promise in the first place. Therefore, the theory according to which we have (also) reason to ensure gladness arrives at the correct verdict about the promising asymmetry.

afternoon and bring her cookies. But on these assumptions, there *are* pro tanto moral reasons to give-and-keep promises, and the axiological promising asymmetry only applies to cases in which there are not.

The negative half of the promising asymmetry, in turn, can be explained by the disvalue of giving-and-breaking promises. For many cases, our reasons against giving a promise we foreseeably would not keep can be explained by pointing to the disvalue of the consequences that breaking the promise causes: in many cases, promise-breaking decreases wellbeing by disappointing the promisee and damaging their trust. If there are cases without such negative effects, but in which one nevertheless has pro tanto moral reasons against giving the promise one would break, one might explain this by the view that breaking promises has intrinsic *disvalue*. Alternatively, a rule consequentialist explanation might appeal to the level of general rules (see, e.g., Hooker 2002, 145–46).¹⁴ Accepting the rule not to give promises one would not keep would result in more good on a larger scale: if many people gave promises they would not keep, this would erode trust in a powerful tool of social coordination and sow chaos. By contrast, no comparable case can be made for the rule to give additional promises one *would* keep; running around giving promises does not foreseeably add more good than bad.

Thus, one can argue that the promising asymmetry is, on some level or other, bound up with an axiological asymmetry between creating promises one would keep and promises one would not keep.

In this way, one can argue that the promising *asymmetry* connects well with an endorsement of a *symmetry* of procreation. For in the case of procreation, no axiological asymmetry holds between adding happy and miserable lives: adding a miserable life adds something bad for someone and adding a happy life adds something good for someone.¹⁵

If a teleological outlook committed us to assigning giving-and-keeping promises a positive value, then the promising asymmetry would indeed pose a problem for teleology. On the assumption that giving-and-keeping promises is of zero value, while giving-and-breaking promises is of disvalue, however, we can explain the promising asymmetry by the core assumptions

¹⁴ Only *full rule consequentialists* would argue that *moral wrongness* is determined by the question of which rules would, if accepted, produce the most wellbeing. *Partial rule consequentialists* would argue that this question merely determines how agents should normally decide or when moral sanctions are appropriate. See Hooker (2016).

¹⁵ Fehige (1998) and Wessels (1998) argue for a negative desire-satisfactionist view on which even creating the best life is no good for the person living it. Roughly, they argue that (without meta-desires) the absence of a desire is valueless, and a satisfied desire is not better than the absence of a desire. The view seems less appealing, I think, if one considers examples like the desire to have friends.

of teleology, that is, that the proper response to value is to promote it, while the proper response to disvalue is to prevent it. The promising asymmetry, thus conceived, aligns well with teleological assumptions—it does not provide evidence that we should leave them behind.¹⁶

5.2. *Further Asymmetries like Promising*

This subsection briefly considers some other analogs similar to promising and argues that the argument from the last subsection can be repeated: they do not give contrastive evidence against a teleological outlook. First, consider that you might induce in someone who could not scratch her nose herself the desire that you scratch her nose (cf. Nebel 2019).

- (−) The fact that you would not scratch her nose gives you, by itself, a moral reason not to create this desire, while
- (+) the fact that you would scratch her nose gives you, by itself, no moral reason to create this desire.

One might be tempted to explain this in terms of conditional reasons. You have a moral reason to make the following material implication true: if I induce a desire that I scratch their nose in someone unable to satisfy it themselves, then I satisfy it. *Prima facie*, this asymmetry cannot be explained by the view that one ought to benefit people unconditionally. Apparently, in the (+) half, something good is added: a desire is satisfied. Accordingly, the asymmetry seems to provide contrastive evidence.

On reflection, however, it does not. Again, the example displays an axiological asymmetry. Arguably, creating-and-satisfying the desire of one's nose being scratched would not add something good where otherwise there would be less good. Intuitively, adding this desire-and-satisfaction is either valueless or does not offer more good than the state of higher self-sufficiency which is realized if you do not create the desire in the first place.

In comparison, consider a case where there is something good added by creating a desire and satisfying it. Assume that learning to play an instrument is good for a child who wants to play an instrument. In this case, you have a reason to awaken in the child the desire to play an instrument (supposing that otherwise, the child would do something that is of zero value).

¹⁶ This remains true even if, for independent reasons, you prefer an alternative explanation of our reasons against giving promises one foreseeably would not keep, such as a contractualist account in terms of people's self-interest (see Habib 2018), a Kantian account in terms of rational contradiction (see, e.g., Kant 2002, 18–19; Timmermann 2005), or even Frick's explanation in terms of wide-scope conditional reasons. My point is merely that the *promising asymmetry* does not provide evidence against a teleological outlook.

Next, consider the *exam-setting asymmetry*. Imagine a teacher is deciding whether to set an additional exam for her students. Assume that setting an exam gives students a claim that this exam will be fair. The following asymmetry seems to hold:

- (−) the fact that an additional exam would contain only unfair questions gives the teacher a reason not to set it, while
- (+) the fact that an additional exam would contain only fair questions does not, by itself, give the teacher a reason to set it.

Finally, consider the *honesty asymmetry*:

- (−) the fact that an additional utterance would be dishonest gives you, by itself, a reason not to make it, while
- (+) the fact that an additional utterance would be honest gives you, by itself, no reason to make it.

Again, one can draw on axiological asymmetries to explain these asymmetric reasons. On the level of the individual act or of principles, not writing unfair exams or not making dishonest utterances would prevent disvalue, whereas writing additional fair exams or making additional honest utterances—in cases where there is no corresponding pro tanto reason—would not bring additional value to the world. Thus, these phenomena do not provide *contrastive* support for an asymmetry theory of procreation.

5.3. *Objection*

I have argued that what separates the procreation asymmetry from proposed analogs like the promising asymmetry is its axiological symmetry: creating a happy life adds something good for someone, creating a miserable life adds something bad for someone. One might reply that the procreation asymmetry is—in the relevant regard—*axiologically asymmetric*: although it is symmetric on the individual level, the counterargument goes, there is an asymmetry regarding the overall good—that is, the general personal good or the overall impersonal good. While creating a happy life is good for the person living it, it does not increase the overall good. In other words, its *contributive* value to the overall good is not positive (see Frick 2017).

However, this raises the question of what the evidence is that there should be an *overall axiological asymmetry*, rather than a symmetry, given that there is a *symmetry on the level of the individual* life. This question is just an axiological variant of the objection from symmetry, which I have formulated in terms of reasons. The *promising asymmetry* does not provide such

evidence. Thus, without further work,¹⁷ the above counterargument does not help provide contrastive evidence. It only defers the question, from one formulation of the objection from symmetry to another.

6. ANALOGS TO THE NO REASON CLAIM THAT INVOLVE PROCREATION

This section argues that proposed analogs that involve procreation do not provide contrastive evidence for the procreation asymmetry. It might seem that teleological symmetry theories, rooted in the assumption that there is unconditional reason to promote value, do not simply have to bite the bullet that the no reason claim is intuitive. Additional—and larger—bullets seem headed their way. Consider values like “justice,” “liberty, equality, fairness, honesty, fidelity, loyalty, . . . gratitude, charity, health, safety” (Frick 2017, 66). It seems that, as with wellbeing, there are moral reasons to promote these values amongst existing people.

At the same time, Frick suggests, it is not even remotely plausible to create new lives for people just because they would instantiate these values (66). In fact, he claims “it would plainly be absurd to think . . . that we could have moral reason to create new persons *just in order* that they may treat one another justly” (66). Prima facie, symmetry theories of procreation, which are rooted in the assumption that one has reason to promote value, will have a hard time accommodating the fact that these values are not to be promoted through procreation.

A conditional reason theory, by contrast, might easily explain the analogs by assuming that various moral reasons are conditional upon existence—just like in the case of wellbeing. In other words, these data seem to provide evidence, beyond the intuitiveness of the no reason claim, that favors an asymmetry theory of procreation over alternative theories.

By considering the example of justice, I argue that these data do not provide such contrastive evidence. They are either decisively disanalogous or, on certain assumptions,¹⁸ the data simply repeat the intuitiveness of the no reason claim rather than providing *additional* evidence.

First, justice does not provide contrastive evidence if you endorse an axiological asymmetry about treating each other justly in analogy to the axiological asymmetry in the case of promise-keeping. Treating each other unjustly is of disvalue, whereas treating each other justly is of zero value.

¹⁷ For a principled attempt to show why an additional happy life does not contribute to the general personal good, see Bader (2022a, 2022b).

¹⁸ The following views about justice may overlap.

From this view, the case of adding a group of just people will be strikingly disanalogous to the case of adding happy people. After all, happy lives are *good* for the persons living them.

Second, justice does not provide contrastive evidence on the “reductive assumption”: justice contributes to personal value (by being [a] *instrumental* for reaching personal value, [b] by being of personal value *in itself*, or both) but it does not have ethical significance over and above this contribution.

From the reductive view that justice is merely of *instrumental* value, it is clear why justice does not, by itself, generate reasons to create additional people: it is not intrinsically valuable. But on this assumption, the case of justice is strongly disanalogous to the no reason claim of the procreation asymmetry and, accordingly, cannot help to reduce our puzzlement about the no reason claim. For the no reason claim concerns adding something that is of intrinsic value: the life in question would be good for the person living it.

Moreover, the analog does not provide *additional* evidence on the reductive view (b), on which one might hold, for example, that treating others justly and being treated justly is, *in itself*, good for people but does not have significance *over and above* this personal value. On this assumption, the claim that there is no reason to create a group of people merely because they would treat one another justly is no *analog* to the no reason claim. Instead, it boils down to a mere *instance* of the no reason claim about personal value (generalized to several people): there is no reason to create people merely because their lives would be good for them. One cannot provide an analog to the no reason claim by spelling out different lives that are good for the people living them, as little as one can give an analog to the claim that there is no reason to plant a beautiful flower by pointing out that there is no reason to plant a beautiful tulip. Accordingly, on the reductive assumption, the case of justice does not put *additional* pressure on symmetry views but merely repeats the intuitiveness of the no reason claim.

The problem remains if we consider the following *impersonal* variant of the reductive assumption: justice has no ethical significance over and above its contribution to wellbeing, and, as impersonal total utilitarians assume, wellbeing has *impersonal* value. Justice, on the resulting view, has impersonal value, but not over and above wellbeing. On this view, too, the case of creating a just life does nothing other than repeat the no reason claim by spelling out one instance of a life of positive wellbeing: “As if someone were to buy several copies of today’s morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true” (Wittgenstein 2009, sec. 265).

Hence, on reductive views about justice, the example does not provide contrastive evidence. This result is particularly relevant because some of the

most influential critics of the procreation asymmetry are utilitarians (see, e.g., Sidgwick 1962), and it is utilitarians who have argued that the value of justice boils down to the value of wellbeing (see, e.g., Sidgwick 1962; Mill 2015). Accordingly, utilitarians might remain unmoved by the proposed analog. Even those who reject a reductive view about justice might find a reductive view plausible for other values Frick mentions, such as health, safety, equality, or loyalty, and hence would reject these analogs.

But the parallelism about the gap between existing lives and new lives also fails on a view which does not depend on the above reductive views or the axiological asymmetry about justice.¹⁹ Regarding *existing lives*, one might hold what I call a *no-reason-to-be-inside-rather-than-outside* view: there are no justice-related moral reasons to choose treating each other justly over staying outside the domain of justice and injustice. To illustrate, Rawls (1971) considers principles of justice that apply within groups engaged in a cooperative practice. Within these groups, there are reasons to choose to treat each other justly over unjustly. But an already existing person has no justice-related reason to join the cooperative practice in the first place.

From this view, the analogy of setting a group of *new* just lives into the world breaks down. The analogy was supposed to make the following divide less puzzling: on the one hand, there *is* reason to change an existing neutral life into a happy life, while on the other hand, there is no reason to create a happy life. But on a *no-reason-to-be-inside-rather-than-outside* view about justice, there is no reason, even in the case of existing lives, to treat each other justly (as opposed to staying outside the domain of justice). Therefore, in the case of justice, there is no analogous divide (between reasons in the case of existing lives and the absence of reasons to procreate) that might reduce our puzzlement about the divide in the case of wellbeing.²⁰

¹⁹ The following view is compatible with a nonteleological understanding of justice. For example, you might hold that it is *right* to act justly, and that “‘right’ does not stand for a form of value at all” (Ross 2002, 122; see also Darwall 1986).

²⁰ A related disanalogy between justice and wellbeing concerns increasing value instantiation by additional lifetime. Consider extending the lifetime of some people in society full of just and happy people. Suppose that independently of your choice, the larger society continues to exist. If the additional choice-dependent lifetime would be happy, this generates a pro tanto reason to add the lifetime. Accordingly, there is a divide between (i) *reasons* in the case of adding additional happy life years to the world via extending existing lives, and (ii) *the absence of reasons* to bring additional happy life years into the world via creating new lives. By contrast, abstracting from potential contributions of justice to wellbeing, there is not even a pro tanto reason to extend the lifetime merely because these people would continue to treat each other justly. Accordingly, there is no divide between extending the instantiation of just life years via (iii) extending existing lives, and (iv) creating new lives. In either case, there is no reason.

To sum up, on various views about justice, the creation of just lives is not parallel to the creation of happy lives. Importantly, again, I have pointed out various views on which the proposed analog of justice does not put pressure on a teleological framework, according to which the proper response to value is to promote it, and the proper response to disvalue is to prevent it. I believe the above argument can be repeated for the remaining proposed analogs about increased value instantiation via procreation. Unless one rules the presented views of justice out, the proposed analogs do not provide contrastive evidence.

7. THE ARGUMENT FOR THE SAKE OF PEOPLE

This section rejects Frick's central attempt to provide contrastive evidence for the no reason claim: the argument *for the sake of people*. I start by reconstructing three steps (Frick 2020, 68–69, 85).

(1) Our reasons of beneficence (and non-maleficence)²¹ are reasons to act *for the sake of people*.

According to Frick, an ethical theory that assumes that those reasons are not reasons to act for the sake of people but merely reasons promote what is good from the point of view of the universe, that is, the *impersonal* good, treats people in a quasi-instrumental fashion as means to advance the impersonal good. It thereby fails to show proper concern for what ultimately matters: people.

(2) It is impossible to create a person *for her sake* if she would have a happy life. But it is possible to avoid the creation of a person *for her sake* if her life would be miserable.

(3) Thus, there cannot be reasons of beneficence to create happy people just because they would be happy. But there can be reasons of nonmaleficence against creating people just because they would be miserable.

The no reason claim follows—without endangering the (–) half of the procreation asymmetry. For the sake of argument, I shall grant premise (1). Even then, the asymmetric premise (2) seems puzzling. How is it possible to avoid creating miserable people for their sake?

²¹ Here, acts of beneficence and nonmaleficence are broadly understood as including so-called existential benefits, or, respectively, existential harms caused by bringing people into existence (see McMahan 2013).

On what I shall call a thin understanding of the term, acting for the sake of people is merely to be contrasted with acting for purely impersonal considerations, that is, from considerations about what would be good not from some personal point of view but from the point of view of the universe. This is, one might think, why one can make sense of avoiding the creation of miserable lives for their sake: if one created them, that *would* be bad *for them*—the miserable people exist at a possible world (Frick 2020, 69, 85). But, as Jeff McMahan has suggested in correspondence, on such an understanding of “for their sake,” one can, by symmetry of reasoning, also create happy people for their sake: for it *would* also be good *for them* if one created them. Therefore, on the thin understanding of “for the sake of people,” the argument fails.

In a different sense of the term, it seems right that you cannot create a happy person for her sake. *Prima facie*, you can act for the sake of your already existing friend in a sense in which you cannot act for a potential happy person who, for you, is nothing but a possibility. Call this the *thick* or *existence-presupposing sense* of acting for people’s sake. In this existence-presupposing sense, however, it seems that you cannot avoid creating miserable people for their sake either. But Frick suggests you can. Why? Frick’s implicit argument might be this (73–75, 85):

- (a) A wide-scope conditional reason can be concerned with people’s sake in the thick sense because it presupposes their existence.

Consider that the wide-scope conditional reason states that *you have reason to make it the case that (if you create a person, you make her happy)*. *Prima facie*, it makes sense to insert “for her sake” at the end of the brackets—in the thick sense. This is because “for her sake” refers to the person in the antecedent, whose existence is (somehow) presupposed: *if a person exists, then you make her happy for her sake*. Therefore, it seems that a wide-scope conditional reason can be concerned with the sake of people in the thick sense.

- (b) Reasons that can be derived from these wide-scope conditional reasons can also be reasons to act for the sake of people in the thick sense (by virtue of being thus derived).
 (c) A reason not to create a miserable life can be derived from the wide-scope conditional reason but a reason to create a happy life cannot be.

There are various reasons to doubt steps (a) and (b).²² However, I shall grant them for the sake of the argument.

Even then, the argument does not stand up to scrutiny. Whatever this thick sense of acting for the sake of people amounts to, it will also attach to the following negative conditional reason. According to this reason, you should not pass up a chance to make a person happy.

Negative Wide-Scope Conditional Reason: you have reason to make it *false* that (if you create a person, you do not make her happy).

An unconditional reason to create a happy life derives from this negative conditional reason. After all, there is only one way to make a material conditional false: make the antecedent true and the consequent false—that is, create a person and make her happy. To illustrate, consider the rule to make it false that (if you develop your talents, you do not use them for the greater good). Since the only way to make a material conditional false is to make the antecedent true and the consequent false, a corresponding reading of this rule implies: develop your talents and use them for the greater good.

Hand in hand, Frick's conditional reason and the negative conditional reason above would yield a symmetric theory of procreation. An unconditional reason to avoid miserable lives derives from Frick's positive conditional reason. An unconditional reason to create happy lives derives from the negative conditional reason. By symmetry of reasoning, whatever sense of acting for people's sake (in the light of steps A and B) can attach to the former can also attach to the latter. So even if premises A and B are true, C is false.

Here is one objection. The procreation asymmetry is intuitive. Therefore, there cannot be such a negative conditional reason. This objection misses its target. Our question was this: *The asymmetry intuition aside*, is there any evidence that procreation is asymmetric rather than symmetric? The *argument for the sake of people*, it seemed, might give such contrastive evidence, via considerations about conditional reasons, which allow that acting for people's sake makes sense in one way but not in the other. This has been proven wrong.

²² Regarding A, one might argue that the reference "for her sake" is only part of the consequent and does not attach to the conditional reason operator that takes the material implication in its scope. Accordingly, regarding B, consider that if one eliminates the consequent to derive the unconditional reason against creating a miserable life, the reference "for her sake" is lost. Therefore, one might object that the resulting reason not to create a miserable life is not, in fact, a reason to act for the sake of people.

To sum up, there are two ways to pose the objection from symmetry to Frick's conditional reason account. First, one can ask why our welfare-related reasons should be (in their basic form) wide-scope conditional reasons rather than unconditional reasons. Second, one can also ask: If they are conditional, then why should there only be positive conditional reasons and not also negative conditional reasons? Even if Frick's argument could successfully answer the first question, it begs the second; thereby failing to provide contrastive support for the *no reason claim*.

8. CONCLUSION

The asymmetry intuition aside, is there any evidence that our moral reasons to procreate are asymmetric rather than symmetric? I have argued that various proposed analogs to the procreation asymmetry do not provide such contrastive evidence. Moreover, I have shown that the *argument for the sake of people* does not provide contrastive evidence either. But it is not just contrastive evidence that is wanting. The conditional reason approach also failed to accommodate the nonidentity thesis in a non-ad-hoc way. Unless other defenses succeed, the no reason claim remains on shaky ground.²³

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