

# Asymmetries in Benefiting, Harming and Creating

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**Abstract** It is often said that while we have a strong reason not to create someone who will be badly off, we have no strong reason for creating someone who will be well off. In this paper I argue that this asymmetry is incompatible with a plausible principle of independence of irrelevant alternatives, and that a more general asymmetry between harming and benefiting is difficult to defend. I then argue that, contrary to what many have claimed, it is possible to harm or benefit someone by bringing her into existence.

**Keywords** Asymmetry · Creation · Existence · Harm · Independence of irrelevant alternatives · Well-being

## 1 Some Alleged Asymmetries

It is often said that while the fact that one's offspring would be badly off is a reason not to procreate, the fact that one's offspring would be well off is not a reason to procreate. We have a wide latitude concerning procreation of happy people, but this latitude does not extend to the creation of people who would lead a miserable existence.<sup>1</sup> If this claim is true, then there is an interesting moral asymmetry. Sometimes goodness fails to provide compelling reasons for action while badness does provide compelling reasons in situations that are otherwise similar. The asymmetry claim can be weakened: It might be said that while the fact that one's offspring would be well off is a reason to procreate, it is a weaker reason than the

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<sup>1</sup> This view is very widely held in the population ethics literature. For a prominent recent statement, see Broome (2004, p. 144).

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reason not to procreate that is provided by the fact that one's offspring would be badly off. This would also be an interesting moral asymmetry. Can it be justified?

We might think the apparent asymmetry could be explained in the following way: Having a child is a significant burden on the parents. The mother must carry the fetus for 9 months. The parents must take time away from their other pursuits to raise the child. Raising children costs money. We might think that we do not have a compelling reason to have a child, because morality cannot compel us to make those sacrifices even if the resulting child would be happy.<sup>2</sup> And we might think that the time, effort and money spent creating and raising a child could be better spent helping other people (Persson 2009, pp. 44–45). If this were all the asymmetry amounted to, it would not be very interesting. Let us attempt to take these other considerations out of the picture by imagining the following scenario. Dr. A has a blastocyst, two petri dishes and a garbage can. The blastocyst, let us suppose, is not an individual, organism or person, and even if a person should later emerge from it, that person will not be identical to the blastocyst. (If this supposition is too much to bear, suppose Dr. A has some gametes...) Petri dish 1 is the happy petri dish. If Dr. A drops the blastocyst into it, it will develop into a happy person, and nobody will have to sacrifice anything for that person's happiness (it will be raised in an incubator...). Its life will have value of +100 for it. Petri dish 2 is the torture petri dish. If Dr. A drops the blastocyst into it, then it will develop into a person who lives in constant agony until death. Its life will have value of -100; no one else's well-being will be affected. The garbage can is just a regular garbage can; if Dr. A drops the blastocyst into it, it will not develop into a person at all. What should we say about the various courses of action under consideration here? I believe that most or all agree that dropping the blastocyst into the torture petri dish would be unconscionably evil. There are overwhelming reasons not to do it. It seems that dropping the blastocyst into the happy petri dish would be permissible, but not morally required. And it seems that dropping the blastocyst into the garbage can would be permissible and would not make a monster of Dr. A. So we have an asymmetry: There is overwhelming reason not to drop the blastocyst into the torture petri dish, but no strong reason to drop the blastocyst into the happy petri dish, even though, in terms of welfare, the two actions are equidistant in opposite directions from the garbage can option. How can this be explained?

Let me at the start dismiss a related asymmetry. One might be a pessimist of a certain sort, and say that every human life is on balance bad.<sup>3</sup> If that were so, there would be an asymmetry of sorts: We would always have reason not to procreate, and no reason to procreate. I do not know whether pessimism of this sort is true. But this is not an asymmetry of the sort in which I am interested. We might still wonder: *if* one's offspring would be well off, would that be a reason to procreate? Would that reason be as strong as the reason not to procreate if one's offspring would be badly off? Pessimism does not answer those questions.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to Elizabeth Brake, Sarah Stroud and Tyler Doggett for pressing this point.

<sup>3</sup> For a recent defense of this view see Benatar (2006); also see Benatar, "Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics," in this issue of *The Journal of Ethics*.

David Benatar has defended the asymmetry by arguing as follows: although pleasure is good in itself, it is not better than the absence of pleasure when the absence of pleasure is due to nonexistence; however, pain is both bad in itself and worse than the absence of pain; thus bringing someone into existence only harms her, and never benefits her (Benatar 2006). I have argued elsewhere (Bradley 2010) that Benatar's asymmetry cannot be defended. Briefly, the problem is that there is a conceptual link between goodness and betterness; but if pleasure were intrinsically good but not better than its absence, there would be no such link.

Perhaps this asymmetry is just a special case of a more general asymmetry between benefiting and harming. It is sometimes claimed that there is more reason to prevent or avoid harm than to produce a benefit.<sup>4</sup> Someone who fails to pull a drowning child out of a pool of water, at no cost to himself, is a moral monster; but someone who fails to bestow a handsome benefit on a child, at no cost to himself, is at worst a bit inconsiderate, and probably not a monster, certainly not for that reason. Failing to procreate when one's offspring would be badly off is preventing harm, and there is a strong duty to do it; procreating when one's offspring would be well off is merely benefiting, and is morally optional.

Or perhaps the asymmetry is less broad. Perhaps when an already-existing person's welfare is at stake, benefits and harms are equally important, but when it is still up for grabs whether a new person will exist or not, it is more important not to harm this as-yet merely potential person than to benefit her. We have a strong obligation to make people happy and not to make people unhappy, and we have a strong obligation not to make unhappy people, but we do not have a strong obligation to make happy people. And of course there is conceptual space for a more complicated position, according to which the reasons not to harm, or to prevent harm, are strongest; the reasons to benefit already-existing people are less strong; and the reasons to benefit those who might not exist are still weaker.

I will argue that there is no asymmetry in benefiting and harming. Harms do not provide stronger reasons than benefits, whether it is already-existing people or merely potential people whose welfare is at stake. If the negative welfare level of one's potential offspring is a reason not to create that person, then the positive welfare level of one's potential offspring is a reason to create that person, and neither of these sorts of reasons is stronger than the other.

Some will agree that there is no asymmetry, but argue that it is impossible to benefit or harm someone by creating her, because this would require a nonsensical comparison between a person's well-being level at a world at which she exists and at a world when she does not exist. So I will also attempt to defend the claim that it is possible to make someone better or worse off (and thereby, on some views, benefit or harm that person) by creating her.

In denying this asymmetry I am not denying that there are any asymmetries in this neighborhood. For example, there might be an asymmetry, not in well-being, but in rights. Perhaps creating an unhappy person violates that person's rights, whereas failing to create a happy person violates no rights.<sup>5</sup> Given that there is a

<sup>4</sup> Popper (1966, p. 284n2); for more recent examples see Shiffrin (1999) and Harman (2004, p. 98).

<sup>5</sup> Ingmar Persson argues against this sort of explanation of the asymmetry (Persson 2009).

strong reason not to violate someone's rights, there is a strong reason not to have an unhappy child but no analogous reason to have a happy child (rather than no child). In this paper I will set aside rights-based explanations of the asymmetry and focus only on welfare-based explanations.

## 2 Procreative and Individual-Affecting Decisions

It is common in the population ethics literature to distinguish between two kinds of situations: *procreative decisions*, where one's decision determines whether or not someone exists at all, and *individual-affecting decisions*, where the same people exist no matter what one does. It is often claimed that the rules are different for these two kinds of decisions. Consider the following two actions: (1) bestowing 10 units of positive welfare on X, who already exists but otherwise would have zero welfare (an individual-affecting decision); (2) creating X and thereby making it the case that X has a life with 10 units of positive welfare. According to many, there is more reason to do (1) than (2), despite the fact that the same amount of welfare is bestowed on X either way (Narveson 1967). If Dr. A could make an existing person happy instead of throwing the blastocyst into the happy petri dish, then he should do that instead.

In order to be sure that there really is an asymmetry here, we need to look at what alternatives to (1) and (2) are available in the circumstances. The relevant alternative to (1) is failing to bestow +10 on X, resulting in X existing with zero positive welfare. What is the relevant alternative to (2)? It might be (2') failing to create X, and thereby not creating any person with any positive welfare, in which case (2) is a "procreative decision." But it could also be (2'') creating X and thereby making it the case that X has zero well-being.

I take it that, on the asymmetric view we are considering, if the alternative to (2) is (2''), then there is just as much reason to do (2) as to do (1); but that if the alternative to (2) is (2'), there is more reason to do (1) than (2). So the view cannot be simply that positive welfare accruing to X provides less justification for the act, *a*, that produces those benefits, when *a* is the act of creating X than when *a* is some other non-creating act. Rather, the view must be that the positive welfare enjoyed by a person as a result of an act provides less of a reason to do that act when the person enjoying the welfare would never exist if some alternative act were performed instead.

Does this also apply to negative welfare? It would seem not, in which case there is an asymmetry between positive and negative welfare. Creating an unhappy person seems just as bad as making an existing person unhappy.

The view that is coming into focus is a form of what Arrhenius calls "Necessitarianism," or the view that the only well-being that is relevant to what one ought to do is the well-being of "necessary people," or people that will exist no matter which alternative is performed (Arrhenius 2006, p. 21). But on the view we are targeting, negative well-being counts equally whether it belongs to a necessary or contingent person. Positive well-being is discounted for contingent people. (We are assuming a unified scale of well-being.) Let us call this view "Asymmetrical

Necessitarianism.”<sup>6</sup> Let us introduce a little bit of jargon to state the view. Let us say that the N-utility of an act = (the total positive welfare for necessary people produced by the act) plus (the positive welfare for contingent people produced by the act multiplied by a discount rate  $n$  ( $0 \leq n < 1$ )) minus (the total negative welfare produced by the act). Now we can state Asymmetrical Necessitarianism as follows:

AN: the welfare-related reason to do an act is proportional to the N-utility of the act.<sup>7</sup>

AN squares with common sense in some cases. It entails that when someone has the choice between (1) and (1'), there is strong reason (+10) to choose (1), since only a necessary person is affected. Similarly for the choice between (2) and (2'). And it entails that given the choice between (2) and (2'), there is a weaker reason to choose (2)—in fact, if the discount rate is 0, then there is no welfare-based reason that favors (2) over (2').

John Broome (2004, pp. 146–149) has argued powerfully that views such as AN violate transitivity. I think they also violate at least one other plausible principle of rationality. Let us imagine a case where there are three alternatives available: (3a) bring X into existence with +10 welfare; (3b) bring X into existence with 0 welfare; (3c) do not bring X into existence. In this case, X is not a necessary person, so X's future well-being gets discounted. That means AN entails that there is not much more welfare-related reason to do (3a) than (3b). But if there was a strong reason to choose (2) over (2'), it seems there should be an equally strong reason to choose (3a) over (3b). The only difference between the cases is the presence of the additional option (3c), and why should the presence of that additional option have any impact on the relative strengths of the reasons to choose (3a) and (3b)? This would seem to violate a plausible principle of independence of irrelevant alternatives.<sup>8</sup>

Suppose you have two options: (4a) create X with 10 units of positive welfare and 9 units of negative welfare; (4b) create X with no positive or negative welfare. Since X is a necessary person, there are no discounts on the positive welfare, so the reason-giving force of the positive welfare outweighs that of the negative. Thus AN entails that there is more reason to do (4a) than (4b). But suppose we add another

<sup>6</sup> This view is similar to a “weak asymmetry” principle defended by Arrhenius and Bykvist (1995, p. 97).

<sup>7</sup> Maybe there are also non-welfare-related reasons for and against actions. I am focusing on welfare-related reasons.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Sen's “basic contraction consistency” principle (Sen 2002, p. 128). The principle to which I am appealing is not quite the same; Sen's principle merely entails that if (3a) must be chosen, then so must (2), whereas my principle entails that the relative strengths of (3a) and (3b) must be the same as (2) and (2'). The spirit behind the principles is the same. Sen argues that there are counterexamples to contraction consistency (Sen 2002, pp. 129–130). I find his counterexamples unconvincing. See Neumann (2007) for a response to Sen; see Broome (1991, pp. 94–117), for discussion of important related issues concerning the individuation of alternatives and outcomes. Depending on how finely we individuate alternatives, it could turn out that (3a) and (2) are not the same alternative, so contraction consistency would not pose a problem for the asymmetry (Arrhenius 2009, p. 308). This is sometimes the right move to make, but it strikes me as implausible in the example I give here; (3a) and (2) seem like clearly the same alternative, though I cannot here defend a general principle of individuation of alternatives that yields this result. On the other hand, one might reject contraction consistency on the grounds that it rules out the asymmetry, but this strikes me as a bad move in this context.

option: (4c) do not create X. Now (given a discount multiplier of less than .9) AN entails that there is more reason to do (4b) than (4a), because X is a contingent person, so X's positive welfare gets discounted. Again, how could the relative strengths of the reasons to do 4a and 4b depend on the existence of this third option?

The problem is not specific to AN. Rather, it will apply to any view according to which there is one set of rules that applies to "procreative" decisions and another that applies to "individual-affecting" decisions. This is because an individual-affecting decision can be made into a procreative one by adding another option, and given a principle of independence of irrelevant alternatives, adding another option does not affect the relative strengths of the reasons to choose the other options. Consider the suggestion, floated (though not endorsed) by McMahan, that in procreative decisions, goods have only "canceling" value—they cancel the negative value of bads, but do not provide positive reasons for procreating—whereas in individual-affecting decisions, goods do provide positive reasons for acting in some way (McMahan 2009, p. 53). We can see that this view will go wrong in just the same way, for the same reason: the rules for evaluating the relative strengths of two options change depending on the presence or absence of a third option.<sup>9</sup>

There are ways to get asymmetries without supposing that procreative and individual-affecting decisions operate differently. So I turn now to more general asymmetries between benefiting and harming that would yield some asymmetries in procreative and individual-affecting decisions.

### 3 Asymmetries in Positive and Negative Welfare

Perhaps there is an asymmetry between benefiting and harming in general—or, as I would prefer to put it, between positive and negative welfare.<sup>10</sup> One way to express this asymmetry is axiological: Positive welfare contributes less than negative welfare to the value of the universe. Another way to express the asymmetry is in terms of reasons: Negative welfare provides more reason-giving force than positive welfare; that is, there is more reason to prevent some negative welfare from coming about, or to avoid bringing it about, than there is to bring about an equivalent amount of positive welfare, and there is more reason against bringing about some negative welfare than there is for preventing or avoiding an equivalent amount of positive welfare (Harman 2004, p. 98). Elements of negative well-being, such as pain, seem to be pressing or insistent in ways that positive well-being (or its absence) is not. If some such view were true, then Dr. A would have strong reason not to put the blastocyst in the torture dish but no strong reason to put the blastocyst in the happy dish. But if my previous arguments are sound, this is not because of anything to do with it being a procreative decision, as the presence or absence of the

<sup>9</sup> This argument is sufficiently general that it might apply to the view that the asymmetry is explained by appeal to rights. Such views must appeal to a difference in rights-violations between procreative and individual-affecting decisions; but if there is such a difference, then the relative strengths of two options change depending on the existence of an independent third option.

<sup>10</sup> I prefer not to discuss harm, when possible, because it is not clear to me what harm is. See Bradley (forthcoming).

garbage can option is irrelevant to the strength of the reasons for or against the other options.

One well-known view that incorporates this sort of asymmetry is negative utilitarianism (Popper 1966, p. 235, note 6). According to negative utilitarianism, an act is right if and only if it minimizes pain (or negative well-being). Negative utilitarianism is underwritten by a denial that intrinsic goodness plays a role in determining moral rightness. Negative utilitarianism is wildly implausible; claiming that intrinsic goodness plays no role in determining rightness yields bizarre results. But a more moderate view might claim that while goodness and badness both play a role in determining moral rightness, badness plays a bigger role Holtug (2010, p. 255).<sup>11</sup> According to the more moderate view, we have more reason to bring about the very happy people than the mildly happy people, but we have *most* reason not to bring about unhappy people. Unhappiness is more weighty, has more reason-giving force, than happiness. This will not account for the intuition that it is *ethically neutral* to bring about happy people. But if the arguments of the last section are sound, that intuition must be abandoned in any case; and the moderate view at least supports the claim that bringing an unhappy person into the world is a more serious matter.

In order for this moderate thesis to make sense, we must state something about what equivalent amounts of positive and negative welfare are. Perhaps we could state that a particular bit of positive well-being is equivalent to a particular bit of negative well-being if and only if a life with both of them would contain the same amount of well-being as a life with neither of them, other things equal. Positive and negative well-being are symmetrical with respect to their impact on an individual's well-being level; they are asymmetrical with respect to their reason-giving force (Arrhenius 2010, p. 171).<sup>12</sup>

This view is not plausible. Suppose I have a course of action available to me that will slightly increase my well-being, but it will do so by giving me lots of positive well-being and slightly less negative well-being. My other option leaves me at the same well-being level by giving me no positive or negative well-being. If the asymmetry view is true, then I should not improve my well-being level. The badness has more reason-giving force than the goodness, so even though there is less of it, it outweighs the goodness. Surely this cannot be true.

Does it matter that it is my own well-being that is at stake rather than someone else's?<sup>13</sup> Suppose I can slightly advance someone else's well-being by giving them lots of positive well-being and slightly less negative well-being; does the balance of reasons favor not doing it? Maybe I need to ask that person before improving her

<sup>11</sup> Holtug argues that it is a good feature of prioritarianism that it implies this moderate asymmetry (Holtug 2010, p. 259).

<sup>12</sup> Note that if we understand the moderate view in this way, it follows that certain ways of analyzing well-being in terms of reasons must be rejected. If the value of something for someone is just the reason we have, for that person's sake, to promote or prevent it, then if some bit of positive and negative well-being make same-sized but opposite impacts on someone's well-being, there must be same-sized reasons to promote or prevent them. Perhaps this result could be avoided by distinguishing between different sorts of reasons. Thanks to Justin D'Arms for discussion of this point.

<sup>13</sup> For discussion of this question, see Griffin (1979, p. 53).

well-being in that way (Shiffrin 1999, p. 130). It is natural to think that when one brings about some negative welfare for somebody, one must typically get permission first, even if a greater amount of positive welfare comes along with the negative; whereas one need not get permission merely to bring about some positive welfare for someone, even if the net benefit is the same. But we think so only when focusing on certain sorts of cases. For example, one must get permission if one wishes to do bodily harm to someone for the sake of her future well-being, but normally need not get permission to give someone some money. But perhaps the reason one must get permission in the former case is not because of the greater reason-giving force of badness, but because people have a right not to have their bodies violated in certain specific ways without permission; X should not give Y a back massage without permission even if it would be pleasant and totally painless for Y. Such rights, if they exist, have their own independent reason-giving force. And they are obviously not relevant in a single-person case.

There is a more radical course available to the defender of the moderate asymmetry: to reject the part of the picture in which intrinsic goodness and intrinsic badness are thought to be symmetrical with respect to their impact on individual well-being. Some programmatic remarks made by Seana Shiffrin suggest the possibility of a view according to which there is no single scale of well-being to which intrinsic goodness and badness contribute in opposing ways. Rather, positive and negative welfare, or the more specific components of welfare, are simply incommensurable; they provide different sorts of reasons for acting, and reasons of different strengths. Here are some claims that are particularly relevant for our purposes:

Accounts that identify harms with certain absolute, noncomparative conditions (e.g., a list of evils like broken limbs, disabilities, episodes of pain, significant losses, death) and benefits with an independently identified set of goods (e.g., material enhancement, sensual pleasure, goal-fulfillment, nonessential knowledge, competitive advantage) would not generate these puzzles. Structurally, they would be better placed to accommodate these asymmetries. (Shiffrin 1999, p. 123)

Benefits do not have the same moral significance and justificatory power as do harms... If the failure to impart them will have no influence on a life, benefits do not generate the same sort of moral reasons as those that compel us to avert and prevent harm that will affect a person. And they do not even generate the same reasons as are produced by pure benefits that would *improve* an ongoing life.” (Shiffrin 1999, pp. 134–135)<sup>14</sup>

How exactly would asymmetries be accounted for by Shiffrin’s account? Perhaps we could say things such as this: each item on the harm list has lexical priority over every item on the benefit list.<sup>15</sup> This is suggested by the claim that “benefits do not generate the same sort of moral reasons” as harms. But this would not be plausible.

<sup>14</sup> Here Shiffrin is distinguishing benefits for already existing people from benefits for people who do not yet, or might not, exist.

<sup>15</sup> For discussion of lexical views and reasons to reject them, see Arrhenius and Bykvist (1995).



There is not more reason to prevent a very minor, slightly painful injury than there is to make a great advance in human knowledge (even if that knowledge will not prevent harms). Rather, some but not all items on the bad list will outweigh some items on the good list. And now we have a problem: How do we determine what equivalent amounts of harm and benefit are? If we deny the existence of a unified welfare scale to which positive and negative welfare contribute in opposite directions, then we are left without a way to understand an essential component of the view: that harm-reasons are “stronger” than benefit-reasons. If harms and benefits are incommensurable, then trying to state how much benefit is equivalent to some amount of harm is like trying to state how many apples are equivalent to an orange.

So the argument against a general asymmetry goes like this. There is no lexical ordering whereby harms are lexically prior to benefits; such orderings lead to absurd consequences. If there is not such a lexical ordering, either there is a unified scale of well-being to determine what makes harms and benefits equal, or there is not such a scale. If there is, it is sometimes prudentially rational to make oneself worse off than one would otherwise have been. If there is not, then the view is incoherent in the absence of some other way to determine what makes a harm and a benefit “equal” (but opposite). All paths are blocked; there is no general asymmetry here.

#### 4 Can We Make Someone Better Off by Creating Her?

Suppose that I have shown that there is no axiological asymmetry: Positive and negative well-being provide reasons of equal strength for or against procreation. This would not show that one’s offspring can in fact be benefited by being brought into existence; maybe it is impossible either to harm or to benefit by creating. The argument goes like this: to benefit or harm someone is to make her better or worse off than she would otherwise have been; this involves a comparison between X’s actual well-being level and the well-being level X would have had if X had not been created; but if X had not been created, then X would not have had a well-being level at all; thus nobody can be benefited or harmed by being created.

It is problematic to understand benefit and harm in this counterfactual way.<sup>16</sup> But eliminating the harm talk still leaves an interesting argument; the conclusion is not that nobody can be benefited or harmed, but rather that nobody is better or worse off than she would have been had she not been created. That is provocative even if it cannot be identified with a conclusion about harm and benefit. Should we accept this argument?

I do not think so. I have argued elsewhere that death is bad for its victim at times after the victim has died—namely, the times at which the person would have been living a good life (Bradley 2009). In such cases, the person is worse off at those later times for having died earlier. So I think there are some cases in which we can make comparisons between a person’s actual and counterfactual well-being levels at a

<sup>16</sup> This has been widely noticed, but for two recent discussions see Bradley ([forthcoming](#)) and Hanser (2008, p. 434).

time, even if the person does not actually exist at that time. Now I would like to explore the claim that we can make such comparisons willy-nilly. For any time, and any world, we can sensibly compare how things are going for someone at that time and that world with how things are going for that person at any other time and world (Roberts 2003, pp. 168–169; Johansson 2010, p. 295; Holtug 2010, pp. 132–134). This means we can assign a well-being level for every person to every time and world. Can this apparently crazy claim be sustained? I think so.

There are lots of possible views about what times and worlds a person can have a well-being level. Some seem concerned with existence—as Arrhenius and Rabinowicz state, “wellbeing presupposes being” (Arrhenius and Rabinowicz 2010, p. 409). They might accept the view that people have well-being levels at all and only those worlds and times at which they exist. But some might think existence is not enough. Plausibly (but arguably not), people continue to exist after they die, as corpses. But corpses cannot have well-being levels! They are in relevant respects like other inanimate objects, such as shoes, which do not have well-being levels. So maybe people have well-being levels at only worlds and times at which they are alive, or are persons, or have the capacity for consciousness (Luper 2009, pp. 132–134). And of course we might think that modality and time are different; maybe people can have well-being levels at all times at a world as long as they exist, or are persons, or have mental states, or are capable of having mental states, at some time at that world (Johansson 2010, p. 298).

What is to be said for these views? Some such views are alleged to be ruled out by “actualism,” which is supposedly believed by anyone with a robust sense of reality, and has been defined as follows:

Actualism: If an individual has a property or stands in a relation in a world, it must exist (i.e., be actual) in this world (Bykvist 2007, p. 339).<sup>17</sup>

Others might be ruled out by an analogous view about time, presentism:

Presentism: if an individual has a property or stands in a relation at a time, it must exist (i.e., be present) at that time.

As stated, presentism seems too restrictive. Certainly there are some properties that can be had at a time only by things that exist at that time, such as temperature or mass. But many others are not subject to this restriction. For example, the property *being eulogized* is often had by people at times after they exist. If presentism is too restrictive, we might think actualism is as well, though uncontroversial examples are hard to find here. But even if we are convinced that there are counterexamples to presentism and actualism, we might be unmoved concerning well-being; we might still think that if an individual has well-being at a time or world, that individual must exist at that time or world. We might think so because we think that well-being is more like temperature than it is like being eulogized. Why think so? We might think that there is an important difference between intrinsic and extrinsic properties, and the reason being eulogized can be had at times after one has ceased to exist is that

<sup>17</sup> ‘This’ is ambiguous, but I follow Johansson (2010, p. 286) in taking it to refer to the world of the antecedent, rather than the actual world.

being eulogized is an extrinsic property; temperature, on the other hand, is intrinsic. We might think well-being is intrinsic too. But is it? According to a desire satisfactionist, how well off someone is depends on the extent to which her desires are satisfied; normally, this will depend on what is happening outside of her body. Since the truth of desire satisfactionism is contested, we should not assume that well-being is intrinsic.<sup>18</sup>

I propose that well-being is not an intrinsic property an individual has, nor a relation an individual has to something else in the world, but rather a *relation between individuals and worlds* (and times), that can be represented as a function from individuals and worlds to numbers.<sup>19</sup> On many axiologies, what determines the number that is assigned to a combination of <individual, time> is what properties the individual has at that time, if any; but on some versions of desire satisfactionism, other things may determine that number, namely what is going on with things that are or were the objects of the individual's desires.

The question is whether thinking of well-being as represented by such a function, rather than one that is undefined for any <individual, time> such that the individual does not exist at that time, does justice to well-being. We could take some function and claim that it represents temperature, but if the function assigns a value for an argument <x,y> where x is some object and y is a time at which x does not exist, then we know that the function does not represent temperature. If the function that represents temperature assigns zero to <me, sometime in 1950> then I must have had motionless molecules in 1950, but I had no molecules at all in 1950, let alone motionless ones.

But I see no reason to think that a complete function from individuals and world-times to numbers could not represent well-being. Think about why we care about well-being. We want to appeal to it in order to determine which worlds or futures are most choiceworthy for an individual's sake.<sup>20</sup> It makes perfect sense to say that a future in which I exist and am happy is more choiceworthy for my sake than a future in which I do not exist. The fact that it is a better future for me explains why it is better for me to live than to die. Other explanations can be given; for example, one might say that facts about one's whole life and one's (shorter) counterfactual life explain why it is better to live (Feldman 1992). But this explanation takes out the future-orientation of the intuition: it is at least partly because of the value of the

<sup>18</sup> One might think that even if well-being is not intrinsic, it requires the possession of intrinsic properties, even if desire satisfactionism is true, since intrinsic properties are necessary for having desires. This is true, but leaves open the question of *when* the individual is well- or badly-off in virtue of having those desires. It often seems wrong to say that it is when the desire takes place. (See Bradley 2009, pp. 18–30 for discussion of this and related issues.) In any case, the point about intrinsicness is not to establish that it is possible to have well-being at a world at which one never exists, but to forestall a possible argument against that possibility. Thanks to Jens Johansson for discussion of this point.

<sup>19</sup> As Broome argues, it is possible to treat goodness for a person, or well-being, as “a relation that the person has to a history, rather than as a property she has in a history” (Broome 2004, pp. 63–64). Nevertheless, for reasons that are unclear to me, Broome chooses to think of well-being as a property a person has, and he thus claims that “a history in which a person does not exist is neither better nor worse for her than any other history... the person's value function will not assign any value to a history in which the person does not exist” (Broome 2004, p. 65).

<sup>20</sup> See Arrhenius (2009, p. 299) for a similar thought.

future part of my life, and because living would provide a *better* future for me, that my death now would be bad. Similarly for worlds; appealing to the fact that the actual world is better for me than one in which I never came into existence provides the most intuitive way to understand what it is to claim (if I am lucky) that coming into existence was beneficial for me. For a world or future to have a place on the choiceworthiness-for-me scale does not require that I have some molecules there, or the capacity for consciousness, or anything like that.

In my view, those who would insist that well-being cannot sensibly be represented by such a function should explain why we need well-being, given that (assuming an abundant conception of properties and relations) there is a relation, represented by this function, that does the main job well-being was supposed to do. Better just to identify well-being with that relation; otherwise well-being is otiose.

If I am right about this, then when we create someone, strange as it might sound, we can thereby make her better or worse off than she would have been otherwise. Plausibly, individuals have zero well-being at all times at worlds at which that individual does not exist. So anyone who has a well-being level above zero has been benefited by being created.

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