

# *The No-Best Action Counter-Examples to McMahan's Asymmetries*

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**ABSTRACT.** The purpose of this article is to introduce counter-examples both to McMahan's Asymmetry (1981), and to his proposed solution to the Asymmetry, the Weak Asymmetry (2009). These counter-examples involve cases in which there is no-best action for an agent to perform, because of the availability of an infinite number of increasingly better actions. Consequently, one might employ these counter-examples to argue against the Asymmetry from the possibility of such cases, or against the possibility of such cases from the Asymmetry.

**KEYWORDS.** The Asymmetry, the Weak Asymmetry, McMahan, no-best action

## I. INTRODUCTION

In his 1981 paper "Problems of Population Theory", Jeff McMahan presents a pair of propositions he refers to as the Asymmetry. They are:

- (1) That a person would have a life that is 'worth not living' – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing (Asymmetry 1).
- (2) That a person would have a life worth living does not, on its own, provide a moral reason to cause that person to exist, though there is no general moral reason not to cause such a person to exist (Asymmetry 2).

McMahan claims that although both propositions are intuitively compelling, their conjunction is very difficult to defend. For, if 1 is true (and one should not bring people into existence if their lives would not be worth

living), then there seems reason to think 2 is false (and one should bring people into existence if their lives would be worth living). More recently, in his 2009 paper “Asymmetries in the Morality of Causing People to Exist”, McMahan presents a solution to the Asymmetry that entails the rejection of 2 – this solution is referred to as the Weak Asymmetry – and concedes that there may be some suitably discounted moral reason to cause a person with a life worth living to exist (2009, 57). The purpose of the present contribution is to introduce two potential counter-examples, the first to the Weak Asymmetry and the second to the Asymmetry itself. These counter-examples involve cases in which there is no best action for an agent to perform, because of the availability of an infinite number of increasingly better actions. They illustrate a conflict between the Asymmetry (and McMahan’s preferred solution to it) and the possibility of such cases. Consequently, one might use the conflict illustrated here to argue against the Asymmetry from the possibility of such cases, or against the possibility of such cases from the Asymmetry.

## II. A POTENTIAL COUNTER-EXAMPLE TO THE WEAK ASYMMETRY

As stated, if the Weak Asymmetry holds, then 2 is false. And if 2 is false, then the following proposition would be true:

- (3) You have a moral reason to cause a person with a life worth living to exist<sup>1</sup> (from the rejection of 2).

Consider now the following assumption:

- (4) If you have a moral reason to x, and you have no moral reason not to x, and you can x, then you morally ought to x (assume).

It follows from 3 and 4 that in all cases in which you can cause a person with a life worth living to exist, and there is no moral reason not to cause this person to exist, you ought to cause this person to exist.

A potential counter-example will now be presented – that is, a case will be presented in which it seems you can cause a person with a life worth living to exist, and there is no moral reason not to cause this person to exist, and yet it is not the case that you ought to cause this person to exist.

Consider the case of the person creating machine (this case is related to the ‘no best world’ theodicy [Brown and Nagasawa 2005]):

You are presented with a worthwhile-life creating machine. This machine will create a finite number of people with lives worth living within some casually isolated universe (so we can rest assured there will be no disadvantage to pre-existing people were we to create these further people). All you have to do is to decide how many people to cause to exist within this isolated universe and the machine will read your mind and create them. What is more, just in case you have trouble conceptualising really big numbers, the machine boosts your brain power allowing you to think of any finite number you may care to.

The question to consider is this: is there any action you can perform in this case that does not result in you failing to do what you ought? Here is reason to think not. There are only two possible types of action you could perform in this case:

- Create: Cause some finite number of people to exist.
- Not-Create: Not cause some finite number of people to exist (which in this case is equivalent to not causing anyone to exist).

Not-creating results in you failing to do what you ought to do. Here is why: according to 3 there is a moral reason to cause some finite number of people to exist; and in the case of the person creating machine there is no moral reason not to cause some finite number of people to exist, and you can cause some finite number of people to exist. So, according to 4, if you do not cause some finite number of people to exist, then you will be failing to do something you ought.

However, creating also results in failing to do what you ought to do. Here is why: for any finite number of people you might decide to cause

to exist,  $z$ , there will always be some further person whom you fail to cause to exist (the person who would have existed were you to have decided to cause  $z+1$  people to exist); according to 3 there is a moral reason for you to cause this further person to exist; and in the case of the person creating machine there is no moral reason not to cause this further person to exist, and you can cause this further person to exist. So, according to claim 4, if you do not cause the further person to exist, you will be failing to do something you ought.

So, no matter what you do, it turns out you fail to do what you ought. We might formulise this argument as follows:

- (3) You have a moral reason to cause a person with a life worth living to exist (from the rejection of 2).
- (4) If you have a moral reason to  $x$ , and you have no moral reason not to  $x$ , and you can  $x$ , then you morally ought to  $x$  (assume).
- (5) You have no moral reason not to cause a person with a life worth living to exist; and you can cause a person with life worth living to exist (from the case of the person creating machine).
- (6) You morally ought to cause a person with a life worth living to exist (from 3, 4 & 5).
- (7) If you Create or you do not Create, then you do not cause a person with life worth living to exist (from the case of the person creating machine).
- (8) If you morally ought to  $x$  and you do not  $x$ , then you fail to do what you morally ought (assume).
- (9) If you Create or you do not Create then you fail to do what you morally ought (from 6, 7 & 8).

If 9 is true, then, in the case of the person creating machine, you will surely fail to do what you ought. For if you Create then you are failing to do what you ought; and if you do not Create then you are failing to do what you ought. That is, either way you cannot do what you ought. So, on the assumption that:

- A. ought implies can;
- B. the case is possible;

- C. propositions 5 & 7 follow from the case; and
- D. assumptions 4 & 8 are true,

there is reason to reject 3, and in turn the Weak Asymmetry. (Please note that I am not asserting that assumptions A to D are true. It may not be the case, for example, that ought implies can [as many have argued]. Indeed the case presented might well be an example of this. Rather the aim here is to determine what follows from these assumptions and propositions 1 to 3.)

Although this case is a potential counter-example to 3 (and in turn the Weak Asymmetry), it could be modified to be potential a counter-example to 1 (and in turn the Asymmetry). It is to this possibility that we now turn.

### III. A POTENTIAL COUNTER-EXAMPLE TO THE ASYMMETRY

What is doing the work in the case of person creating machine is the fact that any outcome you choose to bring about can always be trumped by a better outcome you are also able to bring about. This, of course, is not simply a problem for the truth of proposition 3, but for any principle that requires you to never bring about an outcome that could have been better (for example, consequentialism). However, claim 1 is also such a principle. So, if we modify the case of the person creating machine it may also give us reason to reject 1, which in turn gives us reason to reject the Asymmetry.

Consider the following modified version of the case of the person creating machine: the case of the person preventing machine.

You are presented with a worthless-life preventing machine. This machine will prevent a finite number of people with lives not worth living (who would be created if you don't use the machine) from ever being created in a causally isolated universe. This universe has two salient features: over time there will be born into this universe an infinite number of lives not worth living; and the prevention of any of

these lives will not negatively affect anyone else's life. All you have to do is to decide how many people to prevent from being created within this universe and the machine will read your mind and prevent them. What is more, just in case you have trouble conceptualising really big numbers, the machine boosts your brain power allowing you to think of any finite number you may care to.

Again there are only two possible types of things you could do in this case:

Prevent: Prevent some finite number of people from existing.  
Not-Prevent: Not prevent some finite number of people from existing (which in this case is equivalent to not preventing anyone from exist).

Now reconsider 1 and 4:

- (1) That a person would have a life that is 'worth not living' – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing (Asymmetry 1).
- (4) If you have a moral reason to x, and you have no moral reason not to x, and you can x, then you morally ought to x (assume).

It follows by parity of argument that the same sequence of reasoning previously given from 3 and 4 through to 9, can be adapted to suit 1\* (which follows from 1) and 4. A line of reasoning that would lead us to reject 1\*. We can formulate this line of reasoning as follows:

- (1\*) You have a moral reason to prevent a person with a life not worth living from existing (from Asymmetry 1).
- (4) If you have a moral reason to x, and you have no moral reason not to x, and you can x, then you morally ought to x (assume).
- (5\*) You have no moral reason not to prevent a person with a life not worth living from existing; and you can prevent a person with a life not worth living from existing (from the case of the person preventing machine).

(6\*) You morally ought to prevent a person with a life not worth living from existing (from 1, 4 & 5\*).

(7\*) If you Prevent or you do not Prevent, then you do not prevent a person with life not worth living from existing (from the case of the person preventing machine).

(8) If you morally ought to x and you do not x, then you fail to do what you morally ought (assume).

(9\*) If you Prevent or you do not Prevent then you fail to do what you morally ought. (from 6\*, 7\* & 8).

So again, on the assumption that:

- A. ought implies can;
- B. the case is possible;
- C. that propositions 5\* & 7\* follow from the case; and
- D. that assumptions 4 & 8 are true,

there is reason to reject 1\*, and in turn the Asymmetry.

#### IV. RESPONSE A: AN OBJECTION TO ASSUMPTION C

So, what does all this amount to? The two cases presented here lead us to either reject 3 (and so the Weak Asymmetry) and 1 (and so the original Asymmetry), or to reject at least one of the stated assumptions (assumptions A, B, C or D). Although the primary purpose of this article is to simply present these cases and demonstrate their relevance to the Asymmetry, it may be helpful to point to some responses to these cases that seem particularly interesting.

A promising response may be to reject assumption C (the assumption that the propositions 5/5\* and 7/7\* follow from the possibility of their respective cases). To explain why this seems promising, reconsider the case of the person creating machine and proposition 5:

(5) You have no moral reason not to cause a person with a life worth living to exist; and you can cause a person with life worth living to exist (from the case of the person creating machine).

It is the first part of 5 (let us call it 5i) that is of interest:

(5i) You have no moral reason not to cause a person with a life worth living to exist (from the case of the person creating machine).

5i seems plausible given that the people created have lives worth living, and (as they will exist in a causally isolated universe) their existence will not disadvantage those already in existence. However, 5i might be questioned. Why? Because for any given number of people you cause to exist,  $z$ , the fact that you are able to cause a further person to exist,  $z+1$ , constitutes a moral reason not to cause  $z$  number of people to exist. In other words, on this reading the following proposition seems true:

(10) You have a moral reason not to cause a person with a life worth living to exist (from the case of the person creating machine).

If 10 is true then, in the case of the person creating machine, there is a moral reason not to cause a person with a life worth living to exist; in other words, 5 is false (and so too assumption C).

However, the same point will hold for the person preventing machine. Consider now the first part of 5\*:

(5\*i) You have no moral reason not to prevent a person with a life not worth living from existing (from the case of the person preventing machine).

On the same reading as before, 5\*i will also be false. That is, you do have a moral reason not to prevent a person with a life not worth living from existing. For if you did prevent such a life then you would have failed to prevent a further person ( $z+1$ ) with a life not worth living from existing. In other words, 10\* is true:

(10\*) You have a moral reason not to prevent a person with a life not worth living from existing (from the case of the person preventing machine).

In which case 5\* can be rejected for the same reasons as 5. And if 5\* is false then this argument against the Asymmetry fails. With this in mind, now reconsider proposition 1\*:

(1\*) You have a moral reason to prevent a person with a life not worth living from existing (from the Asymmetry 1).

1\* cannot be true if we reject 5\* in the manner detailed above. This is because the said rejection entails 10\*, and 1 and 10\* are at odds – as you are now faced with a reason both to prevent and not prevent a person that would have a life not worth living from existing.

So, this way of avoiding the potential counter-example to the Asymmetry (that is, by rejecting proposition 5\*) results in an alternative reason to reject the Asymmetry.

## V. RESPONSE B: BITING THE BULLET

An alternative response to these counter-examples is to bite the bullet. That is, to accept that 1 and 3 are false – at least in their present form. However, with a small modification they might be resurrected. Once we recognize that cases involving infinite options are generally problematic, it may be permissible to bracket them off. For example, consider the following case:

Suppose an infinite number of people are suffering. You are presented with a suffering prevention machine. This machine will prevent the suffering of a finite number of people. All you have to do is to decide how many people to prevent from suffering ... etc.

This case does not involve the creation or prevention of people (merely the prevention of suffering), yet it still presents a problem (for analogous reasons) for a principle such as this:

(11) There is a moral reason to prevent suffering. [Prevention of suffering principle]

So, given that this problem does not seem particular to McMahan's principles, perhaps it might be acceptable to modify the principles by stipulating that they do not apply in cases in which such infinite options are available. In this vein we could modify 11 to 11<sup>M</sup>:

(11<sup>M</sup>) There is a moral reason to prevent suffering (except in certain cases involving infinite options [prevention of suffering principle modified])

And McMahan might make a similar modification to 1 (and 3) by also adding this exception – like so:

(1<sup>M</sup>) That a person would have a life that is 'worth not living' – a life in which the intrinsically bad states outweigh the good – provides a moral reason not to cause that person to exist, and indeed a reason to prevent that person from existing (except in certain cases involving infinite options [Asymmetry 1 modified])

McMahan's modified principles may avoid these counter-examples. However, it comes at a price. For example, in respect to 11<sup>M</sup>, it seems odd that in these infinite option cases there is no longer a moral reason to prevent any suffering (not a single person's suffering). Similarly, for example, in respect to 1<sup>M</sup>, it seems odd that in these infinite option cases there is no longer a moral reason not to prevent people with lives not worth living from existing. And if this oddness proves more counter-intuitive than McMahan's original Asymmetry, there may be reason to resist this modification.

#### VI. RESPONSE C: AN OBJECTION TO ASSUMPTION D (PROPOSITION 4)

In the same vein as the previous response, one might argue that assumption D is false, because 4 is false, at least in its present form. Reconsider 4:

(4) If you have a moral reason to x, and you have no moral reason not to x, and you can x, then you morally ought to x.

Perhaps it is this claim that should be modified to bracket off cases involving infinite options; in which case 4 would be replaced with:

(4<sup>M</sup>) If you have a moral reason to *x*, and you have no moral reason not to *x*, and you can *x*, then you morally ought to *x* (except in certain cases involving infinite options).

4<sup>M</sup> allows for there to be only moral reasons for performing some action (such as preventing lives not worth living from being created or creating lives worth living) without such reasons resulting in any obligatory action (i.e. a case in which we ought to *x* or ought not to *x*). This modification, like the previous, avoids the given counter-examples. But it also raises similarly interesting questions.

For example, in these infinite options cases, why do moral reasons arise but not moral obligations? One response might be that, in such cases, moral reasons do not single out a morally best action. And unless such an action is singled out no obligations arise. However, this response seems too hasty. To see why, imagine a case in which you have to choose between actions A, B & C. Action A results in saving a person's life; B also results in saving this person's life, and C results in nothing of note. In this case, there is no single best action (A is not better than B, and vice versa); however, we should not conclude that moral obligations do not arise. It is plausible that one is obligated to perform one of the actions from the set of morally best ones (i.e. either action A or B).

However, in these infinite options cases, there does not seem to be a set of morally best actions (presumably because there is no set of actions that result in equally best outcomes). So, since we cannot perform an action from a non-existent set, morality may not be able to demand this of us (i.e. ought implies can). So, perhaps this helps explain why it is that, in such cases, moral reasons can arise without moral obligations.

Yet, for those who believe we might be obligated in such cases to perform an action that results in at least some non-arbitrary minimal good, this response will not suit. For example, it seems plausible that if

one could prevent some non-arbitrary minimal amount of suffering then one ought to do so, or if one could prevent some non-arbitrary minimal number of people who would have had worthless lives from existing, then one ought to. (Although, as Brown and Nagasawa suggest, it may be that our prospects of specifying such minimal amounts are dim.) And the same goes for those who believe we might be obligated in such cases to perform an action that results in at least some arbitrary minimal good.<sup>2</sup>

### WORKS CITED

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### NOTES

1. It should be noted that we have moved from 'provides a moral reason', to someone (i.e. you) having a moral reason. Such a move may be controversial; perhaps a moral reason can be provided without it being a moral reason for you. Three points here. First, McMahan (2009) sometimes refers to the moral reasons the Asymmetry implies as 'one's moral reason'. So, it might be permissible to interpret 'provides a moral reason' as 'provides one with a moral reason'. Second, if such a step was not permissible, it might be argued that the fact that a person would have a worthwhile life, for example, would, by itself, give you a reason to create that person (although I will not attempt to provide such an argument here). Third, if it is permissible to claim that, at least in some situations, the existence of a moral reason may provide someone with a moral reason, then it will not upset the points being raised in this paper to limit the counter-examples provided to such situations (my thanks to a blind reviewer for these points).

2. My thanks to Daniel Cohen and my reviewers for their comments on this paper.