However, it is precisely because Professor Feinberg’s account requires us to adopt the perspective of already existing people that it is inadequate. In asking whether a life is worth starting, we should not have to consider whether it would not be worth continuing. Nor should we have to appeal to the preferences of already existing people about their own lives to make judgements about future lives. As I shall show in the second section of the next chapter, self-assessments of one’s life’s quality are unreliable.

Although I reject Professor Feinberg’s account of when it is preferable not to come into existence, I agree that we can understand the notion of harming somebody by bringing him into existence, in terms of the preferability of either existing or never existing. That is to say, one harms somebody by bringing him into existence if his existence is such that never existing would have been preferable. Similarly, a person is not harmed by being brought into existence if his existence is such that it is preferable to never existing. The question to which we must now turn, then, is ‘When is never existing preferable?’ Put another way, ‘When does coming into existence harm?’ Alternatively we can ask, ‘When is coming into existence bad while never coming into existence not bad?’ The answer, I shall now argue, is ‘Always’.

**WHY COMING INTO EXISTENCE IS ALWAYS A HARM**

There is a common assumption in the literature about future possible people that, all things being equal, one does no wrong by bringing into existence people whose lives will be good on balance. This assumption rests on another—namely that being brought into existence (with decent life prospects) is a benefit (even though not being brought into existence is not a harm). I shall argue that the underlying assumption is erroneous. Being brought into existence is not a benefit but always a harm. When I say
that coming into existence is always a harm, I do not mean that it is necessarily a harm. As will become apparent, my argument does not apply to those hypothetical cases in which a life contains only good and no bad. About such an existence I say that it is neither a harm nor a benefit and we should be indifferent between such an existence and never existing. But no lives are like this. All lives contain some bad. Coming into existence with such a life is always a harm. Many people will find this deeply unsettling claim to be counter-intuitive and will wish to dismiss it. For this reason, I propose not only to defend the claim, but also to suggest why people might be resistant to it.

As a matter of fact, bad things happen to all of us. No life is without hardship. It is easy to think of the millions who live a life of poverty or of those who live much of their lives with some disability. Some of us are lucky enough to be spared these fates, but most of us who are, nonetheless suffer ill-health at some stage during our lives. Often the suffering is excruciating, even if it is in our final days. Some are condemned by nature to years of frailty. We all face death.²⁰ We infrequently contemplate the harms that await any new-born child—pain, disappointment, anxiety, grief, and death. For any given child we cannot predict what form these harms will take or how severe they will be, but we can be sure that at least some of them will occur.²¹ None of this befalls the non-existent. Only existers suffer harm.

Optimists will be quick to note that I have not told the whole story. Not only bad things but also good things happen only to those who exist. Pleasure, joy, and satisfaction can only be had by existers. Thus, the cheerful will say, we must weigh up the pleasures of life against the evils. As long as the former outweigh

²⁰ Here I assume the ordinary view that death is a harm. There is a rich philosophical literature on the ancient challenge to this view, which I shall consider (too briefly) in Chapter 7. Those who think that death does not harm the person who dies may simply leave death off my list of harms.

²¹ Only those who die very soon after coming into existence are spared much of these harms, but obviously are not spared death.
the latter, the life is worth living. Coming into being with such a life is, on this view, a benefit.

_The asymmetry of pleasure and pain_

However, this conclusion does not follow. This is because there is a crucial difference between harms (such as pains) and benefits (such as pleasures) which entails that existence has no advantage over, but does have disadvantages relative to, non-existence.²² Consider pains and pleasures as exemplars of harms and benefits. It is uncontroversial to say that

(1) the presence of pain is bad,
and that
(2) the presence of pleasure is good.

However, such a symmetrical evaluation does not seem to apply to the _absence_ of pain and pleasure, for it strikes me as true that

(3) the absence of pain is good, even if that good is not enjoyed by anyone,
whereas
(4) the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation.

Now it might be asked how the absence of pain could be good if that good is not enjoyed by anybody. Absent pain, it might be said, cannot be good _for_ anybody, if nobody exists for whom it can be good. This, however, is to dismiss (3) too quickly.

The judgement made in (3) is made _with reference to the (potential) interests of a person_ who either does or does not exist. To this it

²² The term ‘non-existence’ is multiply ambiguous. It can be applied to those who never exist and to those who do not currently exist. The latter can be divided further into those who do not yet exist and those who are no longer existing. In the current context I am using ‘non-existence’ to denote those who never exist. Joel Feinberg has argued that the not yet existent and the no longer existent can be harmed. I embrace that view. What I have to say here applies only to the never existent.
might be objected that because (3) is part of the scenario under which this person never exists, (3) cannot say anything about an existing person. This objection would be mistaken because (3) can say something about a counterfactual case in which a person who does actually exist never did exist. Of the pain of an existing person, (3) says that the absence of this pain would have been good even if this could only have been achieved by the absence of the person who now suffers it. In other words, judged in terms of the interests of a person who now exists, the absence of the pain would have been good even though this person would then not have existed. Consider next what (3) says of the absent pain of one who never exists—of pain, the absence of which is ensured by not making a potential person actual. Claim (3) says that this absence is good when judged in terms of the interests of the person who would otherwise have existed. We may not know who that person would have been, but we can still say that whoever that person would have been, the avoidance of his or her pains is good when judged in terms of his or her potential interests. If there is any (obviously loose) sense in which the absent pain is good for the person who could have existed but does not exist, this is it. Clearly (3) does not entail the absurd literal claim that there is some actual person for whom the absent pain is good.

²³ In support of the asymmetry between (3) and (4), it can be shown that it has considerable explanatory power. It explains at least four other asymmetries that are quite plausible. Sceptics, when they see where this leads, may begin to question the plausibility of these other asymmetries and may want to know what support (beyond the asymmetry above) can be provided for them. Were I to provide such support, the sceptics would

²³ One could (logically) make symmetrical claims about the absence of pleasure—that, when judged in terms of the (potential) interests of a person who does or does not exist, this absence of pleasure is bad. However, (4) suggests that this symmetrical claim, although logically possible, is actually false. I shall defend (4) later. For now my aim has been only to show that (3) is not incoherent.
then ask for a defence of these further supporting considerations. Every argument must have some justificatory end. I cannot hope to convince those who take the rejection of my conclusion as axiomatic. All I can show is that those who accept some quite plausible views are led to my conclusion. These plausible views include four other asymmetries, which I shall now outline.

First, the asymmetry between (3) and (4) is the best explanation for the view that while there is a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into existence, there is no duty to bring happy people into being. In other words, the reason why we think that there is a duty not to bring suffering people into existence is that the presence of this suffering would be bad (for the sufferers) and the absence of the suffering is good (even though there is nobody to enjoy the absence of suffering). In contrast to this, we think that there is no duty to bring happy people into existence because while their pleasure would be good for them, its absence would not be bad for them (given that there would be nobody who would be deprived of it).

It might be objected that there is an alternative explanation for the view about our procreational duties—one that does not appeal to my claim about the asymmetry between (3) and (4). It might be suggested that the reason why we have a duty to avoid bringing suffering people into being, but not a duty to bring happy people into existence, is that we have negative duties to avoid harm but no corresponding positive duties to bring about happiness. Judgements about our procreational duties are thus like judgements about all other duties. Now I agree that for those who deny that we have any positive duties, this would indeed be an alternative explanation to the one I have provided. However, even of those who do think that we have positive duties only a few also think that amongst these is a duty to bring happy people into existence.

It might now be suggested that there is also an alternative explanation why those who do accept positive duties do not usually think that these include a duty to bring happy people into existence. It is usually thought that our positive duties cannot include a duty to

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create lots of pleasure if that would require significant sacrifice on our part. Given that having children involves considerable sacrifice (at least to the pregnant woman), this, and not asymmetry, is the best explanation for why there is no duty to bring happy people into existence.

The problem, though, with this alternative explanation is that it implies that in the absence of this sacrifice we would have a duty to bring happy people into existence. In other words, it would be wrong not to create such people if we could create them without great cost to ourselves. But this presupposes that the duty under discussion is an all-things-considered duty. However, the interests of potential people cannot ground even a defeasible duty to bring them into existence. Put another way, the asymmetry of procreative (all-things-considered) duties rests on another asymmetry—an asymmetry of procreative moral reasons. According to this asymmetry, although we have a strong moral reason, grounded in the interests of potential people, to avoid creating unhappy people, we have no strong moral reason (grounded in the interests of potential people) to create happy people. It follows that although the extent of the sacrifice may be relevant to other positive duties,

Or even in its presence, if it is not thought to be great enough to defeat this duty. Just how great a sacrifice must be to prevent a positive duty arising is a complex and hotly disputed matter that I shall not consider here. There are not a few people who think that the extent of the sacrifice that can be required of us is quite considerable. See, for example, Singer, Peter, Practical Ethics and edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Notice, by the way, that although Peter Singer’s conclusions about the extent of our positive duties are radically counterintuitive, that counterintuitiveness is not usually thought to suffice as an argument against his position. Curiously, though, there is much less hesitance to treat my conclusions as a reductio of my argument. I shall say more about this in Chapter 7.

The condition that the moral reason (or duty) be grounded in the interests of the potential person is an important one. Those who find plausibility in the claim that we have a reason to create happy people tend to be motivated by impersonal considerations—such as there being more happiness in the world. But these are not considerations about the interests of the potential person.

Jeff McMahan says that ‘the view that there is no strong moral reason to cause a person to exist just because his life would contain much good... is deeply intuitive and probably impossible to dislodge.’ The Ethics of Killing: Problems at the Margins of Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 300.
this is moot in the case of a purported duty to bring happy people into existence.

There is a second support for my claim about the asymmetry between (3) and (4). Whereas it is strange (if not incoherent) to give as a reason for having a child that the child one has will thereby be benefited,²⁷ it is not strange to cite a potential child’s interests as a basis for avoiding bringing a child into existence. If having children were done for the purpose of thereby benefiting those children, then there would be greater moral reason for at least many people to have more children. In contrast to this, our concern for the welfare of potential children who would suffer is a sound basis for deciding not to have the child. If absent pleasures were bad irrespective of whether they were bad for anybody, then having children for their own sakes would not be odd. And if it were not the case that absent pains are good even where they are not good for anybody, then we could not say that it would be good to avoid bringing suffering children into existence.

Thirdly, support for the asymmetry between (3) and (4) can be drawn from a related asymmetry, this time in our retrospective judgements. Bringing people into existence as well as failing to bring people into existence can be regretted. However, only bringing people into existence can be regretted for the sake of the person whose existence was contingent on our decision. This is not because those who are not brought into existence are indeterminate. Instead it is because they never exist. We can regret, for the sake of an indeterminate but existent person that a benefit was not bestowed on him or her, but we cannot regret, for the sake of somebody who never exists and thus cannot thereby be deprived, a good that this never existent person never experiences. One might grieve about not having had children, but not because the children that one could have had have been deprived of existence. Remorse about not having children is remorse for

²⁷ In other words, it is odd to suggest that one can have a child for that child’s sake.
ourselves—sorrow about having missed childbearing and childrearing experiences. However, we do regret having brought into existence a child with an unhappy life, and we regret it for the child’s sake, even if also for our own sakes. The reason why we do not lament our failure to bring somebody into existence is because absent pleasures are not bad.

Finally, support for the asymmetry between (3) and (4) can be found in the asymmetrical judgements about (a) (distant) suffering and (b) uninhabited portions of the earth or the universe. Whereas, at least when we think of them, we rightly are sad for inhabitants of a foreign land whose lives are characterized by suffering, when we hear that some island is unpopulated, we are not similarly sad for the happy people who, had they existed, would have populated this island. Similarly, nobody really mourns for those who do not exist on Mars, feeling sorry for potential such beings that they cannot enjoy life.²⁸ Yet, if we knew that there were sentient life on Mars but that Martians were suffering, we would regret this for them. The claim here need not (but could) be the strong one that we would regret their very existence. The fact that we would regret the suffering within their life is sufficient to support the asymmetry I am defending. The point is that we regret suffering but not the absent pleasures of those who could have existed.

Now it might be objected that just as we do not regret the absent pleasures of those who could have existed, we do not take joy in the absent pain of those who could have existed. For if we did, the objection goes, we should be overjoyed by the amount of pain that is avoided, given how few of all the possible people

²⁸ That most people do not even think about the absent lives on Mars is itself revealing. Once forced to think about these issues some will claim that they regret absent Martian pleasure. Whether or not they do, I cannot see how one could regret it for the sake of the (non-existent) Martians who would otherwise enjoy that pleasure. It is curious, however, how some people will begin to say that they do feel sorry for the absent Martians once they realize that not doing so supports asymmetry and thus the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm. However, saying this and its making sense are two different matters.
ever become actual, and thus how much pain is avoided. But joy is not the appropriate contrast to regret. Although we regret the suffering of distant others, at least when we think about them, we are not usually overcome with melancholy about it. Thus the important question is not whether we feel joy—the opposite of melancholy—about absent pains but whether the absent pain is the opposite of regrettable—what we might call ‘welcome’ or simply ‘good’. The answer, I have suggested, is affirmative. If we are asked whether the absent suffering is a good feature of never existing, we would have to say that it is.

I have shown that the asymmetry between (3) and (4) explains four other asymmetries. Given that these other asymmetries are widely endorsed, we have good grounds for thinking that the asymmetry between (3) and (4) is also widely accepted. That it is so is not evidence of its truth, for the multitude can be and often are wrong. However, it does show that my starting point should have broad appeal.

The judgements supported by the asymmetry of (3) and (4) are not universally shared. For example, positive utilitarians—who are interested not only in minimizing pain but also in maximizing pleasure—would tend to lament the absence of additional possible pleasure even if there were nobody deprived of that pleasure. On their view, there is a duty to bring people into existence if that would increase happiness. This is not to say that all positive utilitarians must reject the view about the asymmetry of (3) and (4). Positive utilitarians who are sympathetic to the asymmetry could draw a distinction between (i) promoting the happiness of people (that exist, or will exist independently of one’s choices) and (ii) increasing happiness by making people. This is the now famous distinction between (i) making people happy and (ii) making happy people. Positive utilitarians who draw this distinction could then,

\[\text{\textsuperscript{29}}\text{That we do not have the more marked reaction is probably the result of a psychological defence mechanism.}\]

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consistent with positive utilitarianism, judge only (i) to be a requirement of morality. This is the preferable version of positive utilitarianism. Taking (ii) also to be a requirement of morality mistakenly assumes that the value of happiness is primary and the value of persons is derivative from this. However, it is not the case that people are valuable because they add extra happiness. Instead extra happiness is valuable because it is good for people—because it makes people’s lives go better. To think otherwise is to think that people are mere means to the production of happiness. Or, to use another famous image, it is to treat persons as mere vessels of happiness. But unlike a mere vessel, which is indifferent to how much of a valued substance it contains, a person cares about how much happiness he has.

If my arguments so far are sound, then the view about the asymmetry between harm and benefit is both compelling and widespread. My argument will proceed by showing how, given the asymmetry between harm and benefit, it follows that coming into existence is always a harm. In the concluding chapter (Chapter 7) I shall consider the objection of those who, when they see where the asymmetry leads, would rather give it up than accept the conclusion that coming into existence is always a harm. The objection is that the conclusions of my argument are more counter-intuitive than giving up the asymmetry would be, and thus if either of these has to be sacrificed it should be the asymmetry. I delay discussing this objection until the final chapter because it applies not only to the counter-intuitiveness of my conclusion so far but also to other counter-intuitive conclusions for which I shall argue in coming chapters. (Those who are impatient to see this objection addressed may turn to the opening section—‘Countering the counter-intuitiveness objection’—of Chapter 7.)

To show why, given the asymmetry I have defended, it is always a harm to come into existence it is necessary to compare two scenarios, one (A) in which X exists and one (B) in which X never
exists. This, along with the views already mentioned, is represented diagrammatically in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1.

If I am correct then it is uncontroversially the case that (1) is bad and (2) is good. However, in accordance with the considerations mentioned above, (3) is good even though there is nobody to enjoy the good, but (4) is not bad because there is nobody who is deprived of the absent benefits.

Drawing on my earlier defence of the asymmetry, we should note that alternative ways of evaluating (3) and (4), according to which a symmetry between pain and pleasure is preserved, must fail, at least if common important judgements are to be preserved. The first option is shown in Figure 2.2.

Here, to preserve symmetry, the absence of pleasure (4) has been termed ‘bad’. This judgement is too strong because if the absence of pleasure in Scenario B is ‘bad’ rather than ‘not bad’ then
we should have to regret, for X’s sake, that X did not come into existence. But it is not regrettable.

The second way to effect a symmetrical evaluation of pleasure and pain is shown in Figure 2.3.

To preserve symmetry in this case, the absence of pain (3) has been termed ‘not bad’ rather than ‘good’, and the absence of pleasure (4) has been termed ‘not good’ rather than ‘not bad’. On one interpretation, ‘not bad’ is equivalent to ‘good’, and ‘not good’ is equivalent to ‘bad’. But this is not the interpretation that is operative in this matrix, for if it were, it would not differ from, and would have the same shortcomings as, the previous matrix. ‘Not bad’, in Figure 2.3, therefore must mean ‘not bad, but not good either’. Interpreted in this way, however, it is too weak. Avoiding the pains of existence is more than merely ‘not bad’. It is good.

Judging the absence of pleasure to be ‘not good’ is also too weak in that it does not say enough. Of course the absence of pleasure is

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Presence of pain  
(Bad)  

Absence of pain  
(Not bad)  

Presence of pleasure  
(Good)  

Absence of pleasure  
(Not good)  

Figure 2.3.

not what we would call good. However, the important question, when the absence of pleasure involves no deprivation for anybody, is whether it is also ‘not bad’ or whether it is ‘bad’. The answer, I suggest, is that it is ‘not good, but not bad either’ rather than ‘not good, but bad’. Because ‘not bad’ is a more informative evaluation than ‘not good’, that is the one I prefer. However, even those who wish to stick with ‘not good’ will not thereby succeed in restoring symmetry. If pain is bad and pleasure is good, but the absence of pain is good and the absence of pleasure not good, then there is no symmetry between pleasure and pain.

Comparing existing with never existing

Having rejected alternative evaluations, I return to my original diagram. To determine the relative advantages and disadvantages of coming into existence and never coming to be, we need to compare (1) with (3), and (2) with (4). In the first comparison we see
that non-existence is preferable to existence. Non-existence has an advantage over existence. In the second comparison, however, the pleasures of the existent, although good, are not an advantage over non-existence, because the absence of pleasures is not bad. For the good to be an advantage over non-existence, it would have to have been the case that its absence were bad.

To this it might be objected that ‘good’ is an advantage over ‘not bad’ because a pleasurable sensation is better than a neutral state. The mistake underlying this objection, however, is that it treats the absence of pleasure in Scenario B as though it were akin to the absence of pleasure in Scenario A—a possibility not reflected in my matrix, but which is implicit in (4) of my original description of asymmetry. There I said that the absence of pleasure is not bad unless there is somebody for whom this absence is a deprivation. The implication here is that where an absent pleasure is a deprivation it is bad. Now, obviously, when I say that it is bad, I do not mean that it is bad in the same way that the presence of pain is bad.³⁰ What is meant is that the absent pleasure is relatively (rather than intrinsically) bad. In other words, it is worse than the presence of pleasure. But that is because X exists in Scenario A. It would have been better had X had the pleasure of which he is deprived. Instead of a pleasurable mental state, X has a neutral state. Absent pleasures in Scenario B, by contrast, are not neutral states of some person. They are no states of a person at all. Although the pleasures in A are better than the absent pleasures in A, the pleasures in A are not better than the absent pleasures in B.

The point may be made another way. Just as I am not talking about intrinsic badness when I say that absent pleasures that deprive are bad, so I am not speaking about intrinsic ‘not badness’—neutralit y—when I speak about absent pleasures that do not deprive. Just as absent pleasures that do deprive are ‘bad’ in

³⁰ The only time it would be bad in that sense is where the absence of pleasure is actually painful.

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the sense of ‘worse’, so absent pleasures that do not deprive are ‘not bad’ in the sense of ‘not worse’. They are not worse than the presence of pleasures. It follows that the presence of pleasures is not better, and therefore that the presence of pleasures is not an advantage over absent pleasures that do not deprive.

Some people have difficulty understanding how (2) is not an advantage over (4). They should consider an analogy which, because it involves the comparison of two existent people is unlike the comparison between existence and non-existence in this way, but which nonetheless may be instructive. S (Sick) is prone to regular bouts of illness. Fortunately for him, he is also so constituted that he recovers quickly. H (Healthy) lacks the capacity for quick recovery, but he never gets sick. It is bad for S that he gets sick and it is good for him that he recovers quickly. It is good that H never gets sick, but it is not bad that he lacks the capacity to heal speedily. The capacity for quick recovery, although a good for S, is not a real advantage over H. This is because the absence of that capacity is not bad for H. This, in turn, is because the absence of that capacity is not a deprivation for H. H is not worse off than he would have been had he had the recuperative powers of S. S is not better off than H in any way, even though S is better off than he himself would have been had he lacked the capacity for rapid recovery.

It might be objected that the analogy is tendentious. It is obvious that it is better to be Healthy than to be Sick. The objection is that if I treat these as analogies for never existing and existing respectively, then I bias the discussion toward my favoured conclusion. But the problem with this objection, if it is taken alone, is that it could be levelled at all analogies. The point of an analogy is to find a case (such as H and S) where matters are clear and thereby to shed some light on a disputed case (such as Scenarios A and B in Fig. 2.1). Tendentiousness, then, is not the core issue. Instead, the real question is whether or not the analogy is a good one.

One reason why it might be thought not to be a good analogy is that whereas pleasure (in Fig. 2.1) is an intrinsic good, the capacity

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for quick recovery is but an instrumental good. It might be argued further that it would be impossible to provide an analogy involving two existing people (such as H and S) that could show one of the people not to be disadvantaged by lacking some intrinsic good that the other has. Since the only unambiguous cases of an actual person lacking a good and not thereby being disadvantaged are cases involving instrumental goods, the difference between intrinsic and instrumental goods might be thought to be relevant.

This, however, is unconvincing, because there is a deeper explanation of why absent intrinsic goods could always be thought to be bad in analogies involving only existing people. Given that these people exist, the absence of any intrinsic good could always be thought to constitute a deprivation for them. In analogies that compare two existing people the only way to simulate the absence of deprivation is by considering instrumental goods.³¹

Because (3) and (4) make it explicit that the presence or absence of deprivation is crucial, it seems entirely fair that the analogy should test this feature and can ignore the differences between intrinsic and instrumental goods.

Notice, in any event, that the analogy need not be read as proving that quadrant (2) is good and that quadrant (4) is not bad. That asymmetry was established in the previous section. Instead, the analogy could be interpreted as showing how, given the asymmetry, (2) is not an advantage over (4), whereas (1) is a disadvantage relative to (3). It would thereby show that Scenario B is preferable to Scenario A.

We can ascertain the relative advantages and disadvantages of existence and non-existence in another way, still in my original matrix, but by comparing (2) with (3) and (4) with (1). There are

³¹ Any instructive analogy for Scenarios A and B would have to involve a comparison of two existing people. An analogy involving an existing and non-existing person would be no clearer than the case we are trying to illuminate. Thus we cannot be required to consider analogies that compare a person’s existence with his never existing.

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benefits both to existing and non-existing. It is good that existers
enjoy their pleasures. It is also good that pains are avoided through
non-existence. However, that is only part of the picture. Because
there is nothing bad about never coming into existence, but there is
something bad about coming into existence, it seems that all things
considered non-existence is preferable.

One of the realizations which emerges from some of the
reflections so far is that the cost-benefit analysis of the cheer-
ful—whereby one weighs up (1) the pleasures of life against (2) the
evils—is unconvincing as a comparison between the desirability of
existence and never existing. The analysis of the cheerful is mis-
taken for a number of reasons:

First, it makes the wrong comparison. If we want to determine
whether non-existence is preferable to existence, or vice versa,
then we must compare the left- and the right-hand sides of the
diagram, which represent the alternative scenarios in which X
exists and in which X never exists. Comparing the upper and the
lower quadrants on the left does not tell us whether Scenario A
is better than Scenario B or vice versa. That is unless quadrants
(3) and (4) are rendered irrelevant. One way in which that would
be so is if they were both valued as ‘zero’. On this assumption A
can be thought to be better than B if (2) is greater than (1), or to
put it another way, if (2) minus (1) is greater than zero. But this
poses a second problem. To value quadrants (3) and (4) at zero is
to attach no positive value to (3) and this is incompatible with the
asymmetry for which I have argued. (It would be to adopt the
symmetry of Fig. 2.3.)

Another problem with calculating whether A or B is better by
looking only at (1) and (2), subtracting the former from the latter, is
that it seems to ignore the difference, mentioned earlier, between
a ‘life worth starting’ and a ‘life worth continuing’. The cheerful
tell us that existence is better than non-existence if (2) is greater
than (1). But what is meant by ‘non-existence’ here? Does it mean
‘never existing’ or ‘ceasing to exist’? Those who look only at (1) and

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(2) do not seem to be distinguishing between never existing and ceasing to exist. For them, a life is worth living (that is, both starting and continuing) if (2) is greater than (1), otherwise it is not worth living (that is, neither worth starting nor continuing).

The problem with this, I have already argued, is that there is good reason to distinguish between them. For a life to be not worth continuing, it must be worse than it need be for it not to be worth starting.³² Those who consider not only Scenario A but also Scenario B clearly are considering which lives are worth starting. To determine which lives are worth continuing, Scenario A would have to be compared with a third scenario, in which X ceases to exist.³³

Finally, the quality of a life is not determined simply by subtracting the bad from the good. As I shall show in the first section of the next chapter, assessing the quality of a life is much more complicated than this.

Now some people might accept the asymmetry represented in Figure 2.1, agree that we need to compare Scenario A with Scenario B, but deny that this leads to the conclusion that B is always preferable to A—that is, deny that coming into existence is always a harm. The argument is that we must assign positive or negative (or neutral) values to each of the quadrants, and that if we assign them in what those advancing this view take to be the most reasonable way, we find that coming into existence is sometimes preferable (see Fig. 2.4).³⁴

³² Those who consider only Scenario A could offer different judgements about when life is ‘worth starting’ and when it is ‘worth continuing’. They could do so by setting different thresholds. Thus, they might say that for a life to be worth continuing, (2) need only just outweigh (1), but for a life to be worth starting, (2) must be significantly greater than (1). Although those who consider only Scenario A could do this, there is no evidence that they are doing it. They seem to treat the judgements alike. In any event, even if they could rectify this, their position would still succumb to the other objections I am raising.

³³ In this scenario, which we might call Scenario C, the absence of pain would be ‘good’ and the absence of pleasure would be ‘bad’.

³⁴ I am grateful to Robert Segall for raising this challenge.

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Figure 2.4.

Quadrant (1) must be negative, because it is bad, and quadrants (2) and (3) must be positive because they are good. (I assume that (3) must be as good as (1) is bad. That is, if (1) = −n, then (3) = +n). Since (4) is not bad (and not good either), it should be neither positive nor negative but rather neutral.

Employing the value assignments of Figure 2.4 we add (1) and (2) in order to determine the value of A, and then compare this with the sum of (3) and (4), which is the value of B. Doing this, we find that A is preferable to B where (2) is more than twice the value of (1).³⁵ There are numerous problems with this. For instance, as I shall show in the first section of the next chapter, it is not only the ratio of pleasure to pain that determines the quality of a life, but also the sheer quantity of pain. Once a certain threshold of pain is passed, no amount of pleasure can compensate for it.

³⁵ Where (2) is only twice the value of (1), A and B have equal value and thus neither coming into existence nor never coming into existence is preferable.

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But the best way to show that Figure 2.4 is mistaken is to apply the reasoning behind Figure 2.4 to the analogy of H (Healthy) and S (Sick) mentioned earlier.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>S</th>
<th>H</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Presence of sickness</td>
<td>Absence of sickness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Bad)</td>
<td>(Good)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Presence of capacity for quick recovery</td>
<td>Absence of capacity for quick recovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Good)</td>
<td>(Not bad)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2.5.

Following Figure 2.5, it would be better to be S than H if the value of (2) were more than twice the value of (1). (This presumably would be the case where the amount of suffering that (2) saves S is more than twice the amount S actually suffers.) But this cannot be right, for surely it is always better to be H (a person who never gets sick and is thus not disadvantaged by lacking the capacity for quick recovery). The whole point is that (2) is good for S but does not constitute an advantage over H. By assigning a positive charge to (2) and a ’0’ to (4), Figure 2.5 suggests that (2) is an advantage over (4), but it quite clearly is not. The assignment of values in Figure 2.5, and hence also in Figure 2.4, must be mistaken. ³⁶

³⁶ To take the implications of the value assignments in Fig. 2.5 for Fig. 2.4 as evidence that the analogy between the two cases must be inapt is another instance of treating the avoidance of my conclusion as axiomatic.

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Now it might be asked what the correct value assignments are, but I want to resist that question because it is the wrong one to ask. Figure 2.1 is intended to show why it is always preferable not to come into existence. It shows that coming into existence has disadvantages relative to never coming into existence whereas the positive features of existing are not advantages over never existing. Scenario B is always better than Scenario A for much the same reason that it is always preferable to be H rather than S. Figure 2.1 is not meant to be a guide to determining how bad it is to come into existence.

There is a difference, I have indicated, between (a) saying that coming into existence is always a harm and (b) saying how great a harm it is. So far I have argued only for the first claim. The magnitude of the harm of existence varies from person to person, and in the next chapter I shall argue that the harm is very substantial for everybody. However, it must be stressed that one can endorse the view that coming into existence is always a harm and yet deny that the harm is great. Similarly, if one thinks that the harm of existence is not great, one cannot infer from that that existence is preferable to non-existence.

This recognition is important for warding off another potential objection to my argument. One of the implications of my argument is that a life filled with good and containing only the most minute quantity of bad—a life of utter bliss adulterated only by the pain of a single pin-prick—is worse than no life at all. The objection is that this is implausible. Understanding the distinction between (a) coming into existence being a harm and (b) how great a harm it is, enables one to see why this implication is not so implausible. It is true of the person enjoying this charmed life marred only by a single brief sharp pain, that as pleasant as his life is, it has no advantages over never existing. Yet coming into existence has the disadvantage of the single pain. We can acknowledge that the harm of coming into existence is minuscule without denying that it is harm. Setting aside the matter of
whether coming into existence is a harm, who would deny that a brief sharp pain is a harm, even if only a minor one? And if one acknowledges that it is a harm—one that would have been avoided had that life not begun—why should one deny that a life begun at that cost is a harm, even if only a minor one? Think again of the analogy of S and H. If S gets sick only once, and then only has a headache that quickly subsides, it is still better to be H (even though not that much better). If all lives were as free of suffering as that of the imagined person who suffers only a pin-prick, the harms of coming into existence would easily be outweighed by the benefits to others (including the potential parents) of that person coming into existence. In the real world, however, there are no lives even nearly this charmed.³⁷

Other asymmetries

I have argued that pleasure and pain are asymmetrical in a way that makes coming into existence always a harm. After arguing in the coming chapter that this harm is substantial, I shall discuss, in Chapter 4, the implications of all this for procreation. It should be clear now, however, that the idea that coming into existence is always a serious harm raises a problem for procreation. Procreation can be challenged in many other ways too, but the arguments of Christoph Fehige³⁸ and Seana Shiffrin³⁹ have interesting parallels with my argument.

Consider Seana Shiffrin’s argument first. The understanding of benefit and harm implicit in my argument is similar to that which she makes explicit in hers. She understands benefit and harm non-comparatively. That is to say, she understands them not as two

³⁷ I discuss the implications of this in Chapter 4 (‘Having Children’).