Against neutrality about creating happy lives

Joe Carlsmith

March 14, 2021

(Warning: spoilers for the movie American Beauty.)

> *"Once for each, just once. Once and no more. And for us too, once. Never again. And yet it seems that this—to have once existed, even if only once, to have been a part of this earth—can never be taken back.*
>
> *And so we keep going, trying to achieve it, trying to hold it in our simple hands, our already crowded eyes, our dumbfounded hearts."*
>
> *– Rilke, Ninth Elegy*

Various philosophers have tried hard to validate the so-called "intuition of neutrality," according to which the fact that someone would live a wonderful life, if created, is not itself reason to create them (see e.g. Frick (2014) for efforts in this vicinity). The oft-quoted slogan from Jan Narveson is: "We are in favor of making people happy, but neutral about making happy people" (p. 80).

I don't have the neutrality intuition. To the contrary, I think that creating someone who will live a wonderful life is to do, for them, something incredibly significant and worthwhile. Exactly how to weigh this against other considerations in different contexts is an additional and substantially more complex question. But I feel very far from *neutral* about it, and I'd hope that others, in considering whether to create me, wouldn't feel neutral, either. This post tries to point at why.

1 Preciousness

> *"Earth, loved one,*
> *I will. Believe me, you don't need any more*
> *of your springtimes to win me: one*
> *is already more than my blood can take.*
> *For as long as I can remember, I've been yours*
> *completely."*
>
> *– Rilke, Ninth Elegy*

My central objection to the neutrality intuition stems from a kind of love I feel towards life and the world. When I think about everything that I have seen and been and done

in my life—about friends, family, partners, dogs, cities, cliffs, dances, silences, oceans, temples, reeds in the snow, flags in the wind, music twisting into the sky, a curb I used to sit on with my friends after school—the chance to have been alive in this way, amidst such beauty and strangeness and wonder, seems to me incredibly precious. If I learned that I was about to die, it is to this preciousness that my mind would turn.

Here I think of the final scene (warning: spoilers, violence) of American Beauty, narrated by a character who has just been shot:

> "I had always heard your entire life flashes in front of your eyes the second before you die. First of all, that one second isn't a second at all, it stretches on forever, like an ocean of time... For me, it was lying on my back at Boy Scout camp, watching falling stars... And yellow leaves, from the maple trees, that lined our street... Or my grandmother's hands, and the way her skin seemed like paper... And the first time I saw my cousin Tony's brand new Firebird... And Janie... And Janie... And... Carolyn. I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me... but it's hard to stay mad, when there's so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I'm seeing it all at once, and it's too much, my heart fills up like a balloon that's about to burst..."

Or this passage, in All Quiet on the Western Front, in which a soldier in World War I describes how desirable life, for all its flaws, has come to seem, in the midst of the war, and the ever-present threat of death:

> "The red poppies in the meadows round our billets, the smooth beetles on the blades of grass, the warm evenings in the cool, dim rooms, the black mysterious trees of the twilight, the stars and the flowing waters, dreams and long sleep – O Life, life, life!"

To me, the idea that life is, or can be, "good" doesn't seem to cover it. "Good" feels too thin and controlled; too compared. The thing I'm talking about feels related to recognizing goodness, but in a way that moves past appraisal or assessment, towards something more like devotion, loyalty, reverence, awe. It doesn't feel like I'm asking, of life, "what's in it for me?" and getting some answer I judge sufficient. It's more like I have a chance to witness, and to be a part of, something vast and profound and far beyond myself; something fundamental; something worth fighting for. And this chance, in itself, feels deeply significant.

Occasionally, I encounter people who believe, or whose philosophical views imply, that my own life is net bad for me: that is, that I (and for that matter, everyone else) would be better off dead, and that someone who causes or allows my painless death would be doing me a favor (even if they have other reasons to refrain). Generally, I think of myself as capable of at least some sympathy for a wide range of philosophical positions. This view, though, prompts in me a rare and visceral level of wholesale rejection. I feel inclined, not to "disagree" with them, but rather to *inform* them that they are wrong, the way I feel inclined to inform a solipsist that they aren't the only conscious being (even if I don't, really, expect to convince). If the question I face, in my present circumstances, is whether to keep living, or to die, I choose life, very very hard—and not just to help others, or in the hopes of future improvements.

Obviously, this isn't to say that all lives are like this. We all know the pain that life makes possible. Indeed, one of the central difficulties for capturing the intuition of neutrality is simultaneously capturing (a) the fact that we *aren't* neutral about creating miserable lives, without also (b) implying that the bad parts of the net-good lives we create, and/or the risk of creating lives that are net bad overall, give us strong reason to avoid creating new life altogether (e.g., if you care about the bads in new lives, or the risks of bads, but not the goods, creating new life is all downside).

Indeed, there is some question, for me, about whether there are correlations between enthusiasm for the intuition of neutrality and a certain type of existential ambivalence, at least about our current condition (I don't have much evidence for this, but the idea was made salient to me by a few recent discussions). There is, I think, a way of relating to contemporary life, even when lived in very materially comfortable circumstances, that doesn't really want it to be *over*, but which isn't exactly over the moon about it either. Here I think of an old bit from Dennis Leary, to the effect that happiness comes in very small doses (a cigarette, a cookie, an orgasm), consumed in short breaks from sleep and workplace drudgery. Life, we might think, can be fun at times, but it's also, often, a bit of a drag, a bit boring, a bit disappointing, a bit...dead. And the painful parts are extremely terrible.

But we should be careful, I think, about painting personal existential patinas over the lives and loves and passions of others. Life can be hard and boring and dead, yes—and worse. And sometimes, perhaps, that's all it is, or mostly all. Perhaps even that would be well worth it. But sometimes, and to different degrees, there is more, and deadness is a fog that obscures joy and love and energy and communion that far surpass cookies and orgasms in felt significance (which isn't to poo-poo cookies and orgasms, either). Indeed, complaining that life is too dead seems a concealed compliment towards what life can be—akin to complaining that light is mediocre because it's too dark. And many people, even in extremely difficult circumstances, seem decidedly un-ambivalent in their love for life, and their desire to keep living.

2 Gratitude

> *"Here is the time for what you can say, this is its country. Speak and acknowledge."*
>
> *– Rilke, Ninth Elegy*

Talking about life as a "gift," or as something that you should be "grateful" for, can feel a bit fuzzy. If you were created by a machine that picked possible people randomly out of a hat, does it make sense to be "grateful" to have been picked? Not, at least, in some of the normal social connotations of the term.

Indeed, even if your parents intentionally had children, in many cases they did not intentionally have *you*. They wanted a child in general, and you were the one that happened to result. You might be *glad* that they chose to have children, but being *grateful* to them for having you in particular feels, in many cases, like it risks muddyness (though being

grateful to them for everything they did for you *after* you were conceived makes a lot more sense; and perhaps it makes sense to be grateful to them for choosing to have kids at all, in the same way I might be something-like-grateful to a quirky philanthropist who decided to give a million dollars to someone selected at random, and who happened to select me).

We can bypass some of these issues, though, by imagining someone who is, in fact, intentionally considering whether to create you. I imagine, for example, someone—let's say, a man named Wilbur—who has access to a "person-creating machine," which allows its user the option to create new people from scratch, and before doing so, to examine in detail the life that would result. Let's say that Wilbur has temporary access to a machine that creates me in particular, and he is considering whether to spend a few somewhat unpleasant hours doing so (using the machine requires adjusting various instruments, filling out some paper-work, etc), or to spend his afternoon going on a lovely walk to a nice cafe—in which case I'll never have a chance to live.

I imagine Wilbur using the machine to look into my life. I imagine him seeing me playing music with my band in high school; rolling in piles of leaves in the Wisconsin fall; sitting on the shore of a silent lake with a friend; reading, learning, laughing, crying, singing; and seeing all the bad things too: pains, mistakes, fears, irritations, boredoms, disappointments. I imagine him seeing vividly what my life and my relationships and my projects mean to me; the preciousness, in my eyes, of the gift he has a chance to give.

And let's say that Wilbur, seeing all this, chooses to forego a pleasant walk for himself, and to create, instead, my entire life. Now, I think, seems like pretty clear time for gratitude. If I knew that this was how I got created, and I could find Wilbur, I would thank him with uncommon solemnity, the way I would thank someone who saved my life. I would look hard for real things I could do in return. Heck: I would just pay him, directly, for what he did, if he'd accept the money.

Some people don't think that gratitude of this kind makes sense. Being created, we might say, can't have been "better for" me, because if I hadn't been created, I wouldn't exist, and there would be no one that Wilbur's choice was "worse for." And if being created wasn't *better* for me, the thought goes, then I shouldn't be grateful to Wilbur for creating me.

Maybe the issues here are complicated, but at a high level: I don't buy it. It seems to me very natural to see Wilbur as having done, for me, something incredibly significant—to have given me, on purpose, something that I value deeply. One option, for capturing this, is to say that something can be good for me, without being "better" for me (see e.g. McMahan (2009)). Another option is just to say that being created is better for me than not being created, even if I only exist—at least concretely—in one of the cases. Overall, I don't feel especially invested in the metaphysics/semantics of "good for" and "better for" in this sort of case. I don't have a worked out account of these issues, but neither do I see them as especially forceful reason not to be glad that I'm alive, or grateful to someone who caused me to be so.

3 Reciprocity

"And yet who do we plan to give it to?"

– Rilke, Ninth Elegy

And now I imagine the reverse. Now it is I who have a chance to (a) create some other man—call him Michael—who would have a wonderful life, or (b) to take a pleasant afternoon walk. I stand in front of the machine, and look into the life that could be. I see a child facedown in the grass, feeling the wet dirt against his face. I see a teenager sitting on top of a water-tower. I see a man walking, dream-like, through a city alive with lights and people, on the way to see a woman he loves. I see a fight with that same woman, a sense of betrayal, months of regret. I see him holding a child in his arms, marveling, dumbfounded. I see a garden, an office, pride in some work well done, a retirement party filled with colleagues and friends. I see him on his deathbed, surrounded by children now grown, his hands gnarled with age, cancer blooming in his stomach, weeping with gratitude for everything he has had, and seen, and been given. I see a man who loves life deeply; who wants to live.

I, at least, don't feel neutral, here, or indifferent. Indeed, the choice of whether or not create Michael seems like a clearly weighty one—made so by the richness and complexity and specificity of this man's possible 80-so years on earth. Just as Wilbur would be doing, for me, something deeply significant, so, too, would I be doing something deeply significant for Michael. I remember, here, how I would feel, if I learned what Wilbur had done for me. I remember everything that my own life means to me. This man's life would mean the same to him.

Sometimes, when people talk about this sort of choice, they talk about what would make the *world* better as a whole—as opposed to what would be of benefit to particular individuals. That's not where my focus is. I'm not thinking of Michael as a "container" that could be used for inserting extra "goodness" into the world. I'm specifically looking at him as a human being, and at what he cares about. I feel like I have a chance to invite Michael to the greatest party, the only party, the most vast and terrifying and beautiful party, in the history of everything: the only party where there is music, and wet grass, and a woman he'll fall in the love with—a party he would want to come to, a party he'll be profoundly grateful to have been to, even if only briefly, even if it was sometimes hard.

I don't have kids. But if I did, I imagine that showing them this party would be one of the joys. Saying to them: "Here, look, *this* is the world. These are trees, these are stars, this is what we have learned so far, this is what we don't know, this is where it all might be going. You're a part of this now. Welcome."

Centrally, then, faced with the machine, it feels like I have a chance to do something deeply good *for* Michael—not just "for the universe." And I also feel some "golden rule" energy around it. I would want others to give me a chance to live. In suitably similar circumstances, I should give unto others the same.

4 Applications and abstract arguments

"Between the hammerblows
our heart survives—just as the tongue, even
between the teeth, still manages to praise."

– Rilke, Ninth Elegy

The main thing I want to oppose, here, is the idea that neutrality about creating wonderful lives has some sort of direct, intuitive appeal. For me, at least, it's quite the opposite: other things equal, when I consider the question of whether to create someone who will love being alive, doing so seems to me not just worthwhile, but deeply significant. So from this data alone, I feel disinclined to specifically craft my ethical view to try to ground some sort of indifference about choices of this kind.

That said, direct intuitions about neutrality aren't the only data available, and other things certainly aren't always equal. Indeed, I think the best intuitive arguments in favor of something like neutrality stem from *comparing* the pull we feel to create additional wonderful lives with the pull we feel towards acting on behalf of people who already exist (though I think a better lesson there is just that the latter is intuitively strong*er*—something that those who reject neutrality can say as well). And positing strong reasons to create additional people raises all sorts of additional questions in practical ethics—related, for example, to the ethics of pro-creation, population growth, human extinction, and so on.

I'm not trying to address such intuitions, or to resolve such questions, here. Indeed, I have refrained, overall, from framing the preceding discussion in specifically *moral* terms—implying, for example, that I am *obligated* to create Michael, instead of going on my walk. I think I have reasons to create Michael that have to do with the significance of living *for Michael*; but that's not yet to say, for example, that I *owe* it to Michael to create him, or that I am *wronging* Michael if I don't.

I'll note, though, that there are also more abstract arguments against the intuition of neutrality that seem to me extremely strong. Many of these arguments center on the fact that we *aren't* neutral, conditional on new lives being created, about their quality—even if the identities of the people involved are contingent on our choice. For example, it's very hard to be (a) indifferent between no new person, and a moderately happy person; (b) indifferent between no new person, and a very happy person; but (c) not indifferent between a new moderately happy person, and a new very happy person—so attempting to be all of these things at once leads to trouble from the perspective of various very plausible constraints on rationality (see Broome (2006)). And there are also arguments based on the fact, mentioned above, that we're not neutral about creating miserable lives (basically, neutrality about net-positive lives leads quickly to extreme types of anti-natalism, especially once we bring in considerations about risk). I recommend Chapter 4 of Nick Beckstead's thesis for more detailed discussion of related issues. Abstract arguments of this kind, I think, put a lot of pressure on those who *have* the intuition of neutrality to give it up. But I don't have it.

In general, population ethics is famously hard. I'm not, here, trying to make it all that much easier. But I don't think we should treat "creating wonderful lives is neutral" as a constraint that makes it harder, either.