

Weighing Lives, Present & Future

January 9, 2018

The Non-Identity Problem

The Non-Identity Problem: You cause something bad to happen to a person who would not have existed had you acted differently.

PROCREATION (MARY). Mary wants to conceive a child: she can do so *now* or she can *wait* a couple months. She has a slight preference for having a child sooner rather than later. Her doctor tells her that if she conceives a child now, the child will be born with significant health problems. If she waits, however, her child will be perfectly healthy. Mary decides to conceive now. She gives birth to a daughter, Mariette, who has significant health problems.

Intuitively, Mary has done something wrong; she should've waited. But does Mary *harm* anyone by bringing Mariette into existence?

Person-Affecting Principle: If you don't harm anyone, you don't do anything wrong.

The following three independently plausible claims are jointly inconsistent: (1) *Wrong:* Mary has done something wrong; (2) *No-Harm:* Mary doesn't harm anyone by bringing Mariette into existence; (3) *Person-Affecting Principle:* If you don't harm anyone, you don't do anything wrong.

Responses:

1. *Deny (1): Mary has done nothing wrong.* The problem with this response is that, if we accept it, it's hard to justify that we have obligations to future generations.
2. *Deny (2): Mary harms Mariette even though she doesn't make her worse-off.* The problem with this response is that it must employ a non-standard notion of 'harm'.
3. *Deny (3): the Person-Affecting Principle is false.* Perhaps, Mary does wrong by making things worse (even though she doesn't make things worse for anyone in particular):

The Same Number Quality Claim (Q). If, in either of two possible outcomes the same number of people would ever live, it would be worse if those who live are worse off, or have a lower quality of life, than those who have ever lived.

Problems: first, because people's lives are incommensurable, it's not clear that Mary makes the world a worse place by conceiving Mariette; second, the principle is implausibly demanding; third, what if your decision would affect not just the *identities* but the *number* of people that would exist?

Argument for No-Harm:

- P1** Had Mary *waited*, she would've instead brought into existence a child that was genetically different than Mariette.
- P2** If Mary had instead brought into existence a child genetically different than Mariette, Mariette would never have existed.
- P3** It would not be better for Mariette that she never exist.

So, had Mary *waited*, she wouldn't have made Mariette better-off.

Harm: ϕ ing harms S only if S would've been better-off had you not ϕ ed.

So, Mary didn't harm Mariette by choosing to conceive *now*. (And, by hypothesis, Mary's actions don't harm anyone else either.)

Example: unsafely burying toxic waste in New Jersey.

Worse: it doesn't seem like Mary does anything wrong by conceiving Mariette if her child would have significant health problems no matter when she conceives it; but this notion of 'harm' can't distinguish between these cases.

This is Parfit's solution. [Parfit (1984), *Reasons and Persons*, p. 360]. If Mary had waited, she would've conceived a different child who would've been better off than Mariette actually is. So, according to Q , it would've been better for Mary to wait.

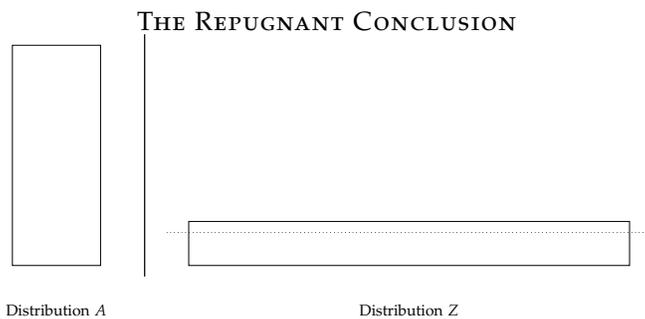
Population Axiology

Sometimes, our decisions affect both *who* as well as *how many* people will exist.

Totalism: X is better than Y if, and only if, *total* well-being in X is higher than *total* well-being in Y . They're equally good if the totals are the same.

$$V_{\text{TOTAL}}(X) = \sum_i^n v(x_i)$$

The problem with Totalism is that it entails *the Repugnant Conclusion*.



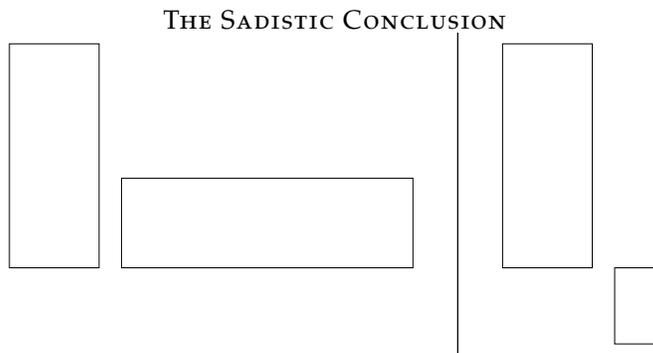
The Repugnant Conclusion: For any population with sufficiently many people, all with a high quality of life, there must be some much larger populations whose existence, other things equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living.

We can avoid the Repugnant Conclusion by evaluating populations in terms of their *average* level of well-being.

Averagism: X is better than Y if, and only if, *average* well-being in X is higher than *average* well-being in Y . They're equally good if the averages are the same.

$$V_{\text{AVERAGE}}(X) = \frac{\sum_i^n v(x_i)}{n}$$

But Averagism has serious problems too; it entails *the Sadistic Conclusion*.



The Sadistic Conclusion: It can be better to add persons with lives that aren't worth living than to add persons with positive, but below average, levels of well-being.

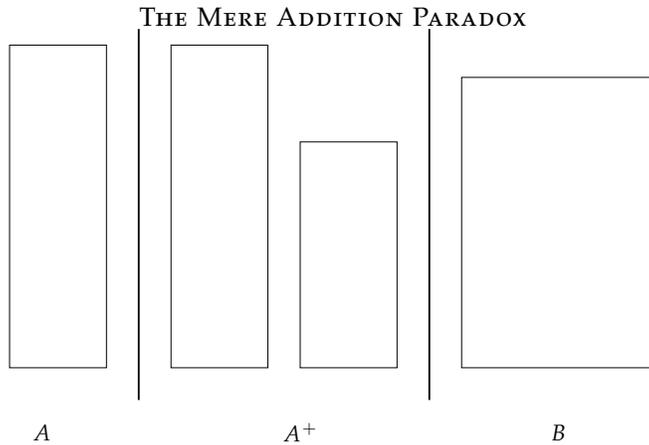
Averagism violates the following principle.

The Mere Addition Principle: For any population X , let Y be a population just like X except that some additional people with lives worth living exist in Y who don't exist in X . Then Y is not worse than X .

If the additional lives are below the average, the resulting population will have a lower average level of well-being.

The Mere Addition Paradox

Even if you reject Totalism, it is hard to resist the Repugnant Conclusion. It follows from a couple of plausible claims.



According to the Mere Addition Principle, A^+ is not worse than A . According to Non-AntiEgalitarianism, B is better than A^+ . So, by transitivity, B is not worse than A .

Non-AntiEgalitarianism: If (1) X and Y contain the same number of people, (2) Y has higher total (and, thus, average) well-being than X , and (3) everyone in Y is equally well-off, then Y is better than X .

But we can repeat the argument above, starting with population B , to show that population C is not worse than B . And then that population D is not worse than C . And then ...

... And so on and so forth, until we reach population Z : a population of very many people all living lives only barely worth living. By transitivity, A is not worse than Z — the Repugnant Conclusion.