

140: Matters of life and death – 26 – The non-identity problem

1 The Non-Identity Problem

Parfit's discovery of a new problem, arising especially with population issues, requiring us to change or extend the way in which we think about ethics.

Recall the doctrine of *Essentiality of Origin* from the discussion of Nagel on Death – if we ask, 'In what circumstances would I never have existed?', the answer is, 'If my actual parents had not conceived a child in the month that they did'. (And plausibly also, 'If that very sperm and ovum which led to my existence had never been joined'.)

⇒ Our existence is staggeringly contingent!

If my parents had not made love on the night that they did, or if the details of their love-making had been different, then I would never have existed. Certainly I would never have existed if they hadn't conceived a child in the month that they did. These contingencies are plainly transitive – if either one of my parents had never existed, then nor would I.

So: *back 300 years* – there are about 4000 people then existing, the absence of any one of whom means that I never exist; and there are about 2000 couples, a slight alteration in the sexual behavior of any one of whom would mean that I never exist.

And so: *forward 300 years* – if one in 2000 child-bearing couples now alters their mode of conception only slightly, then almost all those living in 300 years time *would not have existed otherwise*.

⇒ Public policies that effect sexual behavior and fertility in quite minor ways will totally change the individuals making up future populations.

E.g. the Risky Policy – suppose our atomic energy policy involves storing nuclear waste in a way that will be safe for 300 years, but with serious risks beyond that (e.g. drums corroding on the sea-bed). In 300 years there is in fact a catastrophe, and many thousands die prematurely of cancer. If we had not had this policy we would have been slightly worse off, affecting many details of our lives (including sexual and reproductive).

So: *those who die would never have lived at all if we had adopted the Safe Policy instead!*

2 Harm, Rights, and Contractualism

Presumably there is some moral objection to the Risky Policy. But what?

(a) The Risky Policy *harms* those who later die? But that same policy causes them to exist! This is a "harm" that is literally unavoidable – if we try to avoid it, *those* people never exist at all.

(b) The policy *violates the rights* of those who die? But these rights *cannot* be fulfilled – if we try to fulfill them, we bring it about that *those* people never exist. Perhaps it is wrong to cause people to exist whose rights cannot be fulfilled? But those people would almost certainly *waive* their rights, once they realize that any change would mean that they never exist.

(c) The policy would be rejected *from behind the veil of ignorance*? Because the Safe Policy would leave me almost the same or better off no matter who I am? But this assumes that I will exist whatever policy is chosen, which begs the question at issue. Like someone opting for offices only open to men, assuming that he will certainly be a man! (But if rational contractors do *not* assume that they will exist, then rational choice is impossible!)

(d) The policy would be reasonably rejected by some of those aiming at free agreement (Scanlon)? But not so – it cannot be reasonable to reject a policy on self-interested grounds, if doing so would mean you never exist. Once those who are caused to get cancer from the Risky Policy realize that they owe their existence to that very policy, then they cannot rationally reject it.

⇒ Principles dealing with harm, rights, or justice cannot help us with population issues.

⇒ We need to appeal to broadly utilitarian principles (which could also be principles of Beneficence or Charity within Contractualism) – assessing badness of outcomes without assuming they are *bad for any individual*.

E.g. propose: *it is bad if those who live are worse off than those who would have lived*.

3. Two Individual-Indifferent Principles of Beneficence

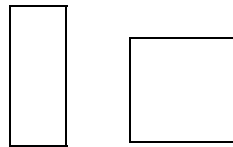
The individual-indifferent principle stated above can explain why the Risky Policy is wrong, *provided* that the numbers of people who exist under the two policies are the same.

But this makes it useless when we come to discuss questions of population policy. There are two obvious extensions of it –

Average – *other things being equal, an outcome is better if people's lives go on average better.*

Total – *other things being equal, an outcome is better if it has a greater total of what makes lives go better.*

Illustrate with two worlds –



A B

B contains twice as many people as A, all rather worse off, but still more than half as well off as those in A. *Average* implies that A is the better world; *Total* implies that B is the better world.

Against Total – this seems to lead directly to **the Repugnant Conclusion** that the best world is one in which there is an immense population of people, each of whose lives is just barely worth living. (If things were to get only slightly worse for them, then they would prefer unconsciousness to their present mode of life.)

So there can be no such thing as over-population! (almost – provided that people have lives that are better than nothing)

Against Average – the best world-history is one in which only Adam and Eve ever live!

Or – **Only Norway Survives**: suppose Norwegians have the best mode of life in the world. Suppose all humans are infected with a disease that renders them sterile, and Norway only manages to manufacture just enough antidote for itself. Only they survive into the next generation, with a slightly reduced standard of living, but still higher than the average of the rest of us. *Average* predicts that this would be a better world! It would be better if everyone but the best off were not to exist!

⇒ Neither principle is acceptable?

(Other more complex alternatives are possible – see Parfit *Reasons and Persons* chapter 18, who argues none are acceptable.) A problem – in what terms are we to think about population issues?

A final thought in support of *Average* – perhaps *Only Norway Survives* is only counter-intuitive because so much of the richness and variety of human life would be lost? Perhaps it puts too much stress on economic well-being, rather than cultural and intellectual?

Better example as a test of *Average* – suppose world population had stabilized 200 years ago, while retaining all the technological advances we have had since. So there is a much smaller world population, but with just as much richness and variety as now, and everyone is in many respects rather better off than now. That *would* have been a better outcome?