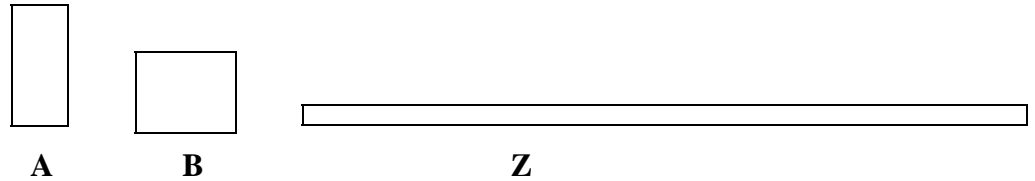


140: Matters of life and death – 27 – How many people should there be?

1. The Mere Addition Paradox (See Parfit, 'Overpopulation and the Quality of Life', in Singer 1986.)

Recall the three worlds:



If we accept *Total*, and believe that B is better than A, then we shall be forced to the Repugnant Conclusion that Z is best of all.

Parfit assumes we will be inclined to think that B is worse than A, but presents an argument designed to challenge this belief from apparently undeniable premises. This is an argument forcing us towards the Repugnant Conclusion anyway.

Compare these two worlds:



E.g. A+ is Europe and America before America is discovered. A is a world in which Native Americans never cross the Bering Straights.

Is A+ worse than A? How can it be? Everyone who exists in A is there in A+ and is just as well off, and there are some additional people whose lives are well worth living. If A+ is worse, then we have to say that it would have been better if America had never been populated, and better if those people had never existed! So **A+ is not worse than A.**

Now compare these two worlds:



In Divided B the people in A (the Europeans) have all become slightly less well off, but the additional people in A+ (the Native Americans) have all gained much more. (Note: this is *imaginary* history!) So in all respects (on grounds of greater equality, and both *Total* and *Average*) **Divided B is better than A+.** Then since B differs from Divided B only in that the two populations have come together (America has been discovered), without affecting the quality of life of anyone, **B is better than A+.**

We can now argue – (1) A+ *isn't* worse than A (2) B is *better* than A+ (3) So **B isn't worse than A.**

Can we accept this conclusion? Two things might seem to suggest not –

(a) The argument can be reiterated to show that C isn't worse than B, that D isn't worse than C, and so on to Z. Then we will have shown that **Z isn't worse than A**, which is *almost* the Repugnant Conclusion.

(b) Can we not conclude from premises (1) and (2) that B is *better* than A (on the grounds that 'not worse' means 'equal to or better than')? The argument would then reiterate to give the Repugnant Conclusion that **Z is better than A.**

In fact arguments (a) and (b) *aren't* sound (see Parfit *Reasons and Persons* pp.431-2). Seeing why is seeing the reason why Parfit goes on to develop the more complex argument in Singer 1986.

2. Is “not worse” Transitive?

Argument (b) is only valid if ‘not worse’ means ‘equal or better’. But it doesn’t. Imagine a music competition with three finalists – Pianist A, Cellist B, Pianist C. Cellist B might be *not worse than* A (they are “in the same league”). Pianist A might be *better than* C. It **does not follow** that Cellist B is better than Pianist C. The most we may be able to say, again, is that B and C are in the same league.

This can happen wherever we have judgments of *essentially-rough comparability* – as with different types of literature or music, or with the value/happiness of different lives.

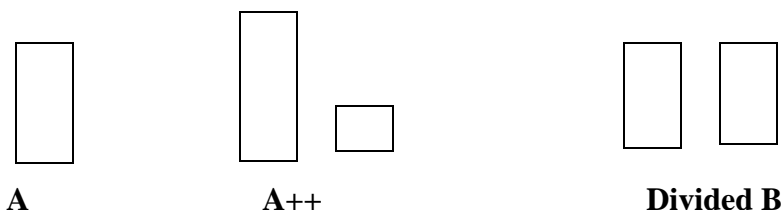
The example shows that ‘not worse’ isn’t transitive. For we have – Cellist B isn’t worse than Pianist A; Pianist C isn’t worse than Cellist B; but C *is* worse than A.

So we can now block the argument in (a) above too – we can have B isn’t worse than A, C isn’t worse than B, but maintain that C *is* worse than A. So we never get as far as Z.

3. The repugnant conclusion again

It is because ‘not worse’ isn’t transitive that Parfit (in Singer 1986) gives his second argument, this time for the conclusion that Z *is better than* A.

The argument is too complex to present in detail, but the crucial comparisons are similar to those between the following three worlds:



In A++ the people in A are all slightly better off, and there are an equal number of additional new people whose lives are well worth living (and in Parfit’s actual example the inequality is also much less obvious).

So we have to conclude that **A++ is better than A**. For everyone who exists anyway (in A) is better off; and how can the mere addition of extra worthwhile lives make the world worse?

But now, by the same argument as before, **Divided B is better than A++**, on grounds of greater equality, *Total* and *Average*.

So **Divided B is better than A**. But B is no different from Divided B; the two groups have just come together. So B is better than A. Then the argument reiterates, to show that Z is better than A.

How can we avoid the conclusion? One possibility would be to deny that Divided B is better than A++, on grounds of **elitism**. We could say that what matters most is the condition of the best off! (This is the opposite of Rawls’ ‘Difference Principle’.) So the move from A++ to Divided B would be bad because the best off lose something, even though those worse off gain much more. Desperate stuff!

Another possibility would be to take our stand on *Average*, and deny that A++ is better than A. But to do this we have to be able to tell the people in A that it *isn’t good* if they get better off, merely because their increased happiness/welfare is accompanied by the existence of some extra worthwhile lives which lower the average. And we have to be able to say to the extra people in A++ that it would have been better if they had never existed, since they lower the average.

Parfit himself proposes to claim that *some versions* of Divided B are worse than A++ on grounds of **perfectionism** – the doctrine that what matters most is the best things in life.

4. Perfectionism

Parfit's own suggestion involves distinguishing between two ways in which a group can be worse off – (i) they can **lack** some of the good things in life; or (ii) they can have **less** of the good things in life.

Perfectionism is then the doctrine that what matters most is the best things of life (e.g. Mozart's music, Jane Austen's novels, the architecture of Venice).

Then we can deny that Divided B is better than A++ if (but *only* if) the change from A++ results in the loss of some of the best things in life.

Note: Perfectionism is *not* (or need not be) the belief in the *intrinsic value* of great music, literature, deep friendships, etc. Rather, the idea is that someone who loses one of the best things from their life loses *incomparably more than* is gained by someone who gains much more of something less good. Maybe this is defensible? – We say "better to have loved and lost than never to have loved". And compare Parfit's Century of Ecstasy with Drab Eternity. (But – a century of ecstasy versus a *very good* eternity??!)

But anyway Parfit is still vulnerable to a version of the Repugnant Conclusion – that a world in which there is a huge population of people with lives only barely worth living, but where each life contains one of each of the very best experiences, is *better than* a smaller population where people have all these and much more.

5. Average Again?

A very tentative suggestion – perhaps the only solution is to take a stand on *Average*, and insist that A++ is actually *worse* than A, because the additional people lower the average.

Perhaps we go wrong in this example because we slip into making a *retrospective* judgment from the position of the people who actually exist (and of course no one in A++ will regret the change).

Rather, we should be making a *prospective* judgment, since we are faced with a choice of *creating* one of two future populations.

⇒ The best world is the one in which the average is highest (where richness and variety of experience will be an important ingredient in the average)?