Studies in Social Science Research
ISSN 2690-0793 (Print) ISSN 2690-0785 (Online)
Vol. 6, No. 1, 2025
www.scholink.org/ojs/index.php/sssr

Original Paper

Non-Identity Problem: Impersonal Total Principle and Population Implications

Liang Zhang

Department of philosophy (Zhuhai), Sun Yat-sen University, Zhuhai City, China

Received: January 5, 2024 Accepted: November 24, 2024 Online Published: December 26, 2024

doi:10.22158/sssr.v6n1p1 URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sssr.v6n1p1

Abstract

Some philosophers have argued that the Impersonal Total Principle can resolve the Non-Identity Problem by stipulating that the act under scrutiny is considered wrong when it fails to maximize utility. This perspective has faced criticism for (1) implying an excessively stringent moral requirement and (2) leading to the Repugnant Conclusion. In this paper, I present the following arguments: (a) the welfare of potential individuals holds equal significance to that of actual individuals, (b) in addition to mitigating suffering, the well-being of individuals also carries importance. Our duty to improve the well-being of others is weak rather than strong, thus indicating that the Impersonal Total Principle does not entail an overly strict moral requirement. Furthermore, I maintain that either the Impersonal Total Principle cannot lead to the Repugnant Conclusion, or the conclusion itself, which appears "repugnant," is not truly repugnant. Considering my analysis, I propose the adoption of a resource-conserving lifestyle to contribute to a sustainable future for potential beings.

Keywords

Non-Identity Problem, impersonal, potential people, Repugnant Conclusion, Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle

1. Introduction

Consider the following case,

> The Buried Nuclear Waste. In a time long ago, hundreds years in the past, let's imagine the existence of a nuclear power plant that possessed highly advanced technology. This technology enabled near-zero pollution in the disposal of nuclear waste, all at minimal cost. In pursuit of saving expenses, the power plant made the decision to bury the waste. Although the consequences of this decision did not directly impact the people of that era, it undeniably had an

adverse effect on the health of the residents in the surrounding areas for future generations, including our present time. Despite this, our lives are still worth living. However, had the power plant opted for a more environmentally friendly solution, it could have set into motion the butterfly effect, resulting in a cascade of different events and ultimately altering the course of history for both us and the generations that followed.

As we can see sometimes, a seemingly bad act is not only the reason for someone's though worth having, unavoidably flawed – existence, but also the reason for his being brought into existence at all (Note 1). The only alternatives are either to cause no one into existence or to bring into existence a different person who is not identical but is better off in place of the original individual. Since the individual with a flawed existence still has a life worth living and his existence does not cause any harm to those who currently exist or will exist in the future, it seems that there is nothing inherently wrong in choosing him over the better off person. However, this perspective contradicts our common sense moral intuition. We typically believe in protecting the environment rather than destroying it. We also believe that it would be better for a 14-year-old girl to have a child 10 years later rather than at present, as both choices would result in different people existing, and the latter's existence would inevitably be flawed. So what moral reasons are there to support the claim that the second choices are morally wrong? Or are they ultimately wrong?

The answer to this question constitutes the Non-Identity Problem. Some philosophers (Parfit (Note 2), 1984; Singer, 2011, pp. 107–119) have argued that the problem can be solved by the total form of impersonalism view--the Impersonal Total Principle, which is essentially an application of total utilitarianism to the non-identity problem. In other words, although the act under scrutiny does not make things worse for the existing people, it fails to maximize utility by bringing those better off into existence had the other choice been made, while also considering the welfare (Note 3) of potential people; therefore, the act is morally wrong. However, critics have argued that the Impersonal Total Principle (1) imposes too strong a moral requirement; (2) results in the Repugnant Conclusion. In this paper, I argue that (a) the welfare of potential people is just as important as that of actual people; (b) in addition to mitigating suffering, the well-being of individuals also carries importance. Our duty to improve the well-being of others is weak rather than strong, thus indicating that the Impersonal Total Principle does not entail an overly strict moral requirement; (c) either the Impersonal Total Principle cannot lead to the repugnant conclusion, or the seemingly "repugnant" conclusion is not genuinely repugnant at all.

This paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I will outline the non-identity problem and discuss various key responses. In Section 3, I will elaborate on the necessity of embracing impersonalism as a means to address this problem. In Section 4, I will present an overview of and respond to two primary objections that have been raised against the Impersonal Total Principle: (1) the objection of an excessively stringent moral requirement; (2) the objection of the Repugnant Conclusion.

2. Key Responses to the Non-Identity Problem

The non-identity problem poses a challenge due to its implication of three widely accepted assumptions that collectively give rise to a paradox. As Erik Magnusson (2019, 583) succinctly summarizes:

(1) the act in question is morally objectionable;

(2) for an act to be morally objectionable, it must wrong a particular person;

(3) for an act to wrong a particular person, it must make them comparatively worse off.

Correspondingly, there are three kinds of responses. Some philosophers (Boonin, 2008; Bayne, 2010) reject (1) but retain assumptions (2) and (3). They simply argue that the acts under scrutiny are not, after all, morally wrong. For instance, if we were to assign blame to our ancestors for burying nuclear waste, some might argue that, based on the butterfly effect, altering their actions would have resulted in the existence of nonidentical individuals rather than ourselves. Therefore, if our life is still worth living (it's better than never coming into existence at all), it can be argued that no harm has been done and nothing morally wrong has occurred. However, this solution contradicts our moral intuitions. According to this line of reasoning, as long as our actions do not make the lives of future generations "not worth living", we are absolved of any wrongdoing, regardless of our actions for them. Therefore, I reject this solution without further discussion of its particulars.

The second solution rejects (3) but retains (1) and (2), which holds that, although the act of burying nuclear waste doesn't make the affected individuals comparatively worse off, it still wrongs them (Harman, 2004; Cohen, 2009). This solution is known as the person-affecting view. However, considering the non-identity fact, I argue that this view is fundamentally flawed. In the case of burying nuclear waste, it is not reasonable for any individual affected, whose life is worth living, to demand a different approach to dealing with nuclear waste that would prevent their existence and let another nonidentical individual take their place. Therefore, there is no obligation to handle nuclear waste differently. Our inclination to believe that individuals have been harmed or wronged due to nuclear waste stems from an illusory moral intuition, which fails to recognize the non-identity fact. If people always bear this fact in mind, they would either refrain from blaming ancestors for burying nuclear waste or base any blame on impersonalist reasons.

In this paper, the main focus will be on the third solution, aiming to provide justification for it, which rejects (2) but retains (1) and (3). According to this perspective, the acts under scrutiny are deemed morally wrong because they fall short of promoting certain impersonal values (Parfit, 1984; Singer, 2011, pp. 107–119). This implies that, in addition to the welfare of existing people, the welfare of potential individuals should also be taken into consideration.

There are three main variations on this line of response: the Impersonal Average Principle (the average form), the Impersonal Total Principle (the total form), and the Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle, which appears to be a combination of the two forms of the impersonalism principle.

The difference between the average form and the total form lies in the consideration of individual welfare versus aggregate welfare. These two approaches only differ when faced with what Parfit refers

to as the "Different Number Case" (Parfit, 1984, p. 423), where choices under scrutiny affect both the number and identities of future individuals. The average form solely considers which choice would benefit each person more, while the total form focuses on the choice that would maximize the total sum of benefits. Both forms are deemed imperfect by philosophers. The total form leads to what Parfit terms as "The Repugnant Conclusion" (Parfit, 1984, p. 387). On the other hand, the average form, while able to evade it, implausibly implies that we should refrain from bringing an ordinary child into existence if those already existing have better lives. Moreover, it appears to condone what Temkin refers to as "Hell Three" (Temkin, 2012, pp. 319–320). Imagine three tiers of suffering: the first consisting of individuals leading extremely miserable lives, the second consisting of individuals leading even more miserable lives, and the third comprising the cumulative suffering of the previous two. According to the average form, the third tier is considered better than the second, despite the fact that more people are leading lives not worth living—an intuitively counter-intuitive result. Thus, in this paper, I will reject the Impersonal Average Principle without further elaboration.

Parfit (2017 p. 154) proposes the Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle, which he believes can address the criticisms faced by the two forms of the impersonalism principle. We will discuss it in greater detail later.

In the following sections, I will argue for the application of the Impersonal Total Principle rather than the Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle in addressing the non-identity problem.

3. An Impersonalistic Approach

The term "impersonalism" refers to the lack of distinction between different individuals, including both actual and potential people. "Actual people" encompass both current and future individuals who currently exist or *will* come into existence. On the other hand, "potential people" are those *who would have existed if different choices had been made*. The main aspect of the non-identity problem lies in determining our moral stance toward these potential people. In other words, the moral validity of the impersonalism solution depends on the extent to which we attribute moral significance to potential people.

3.1 Do Potential People Have Moral Significance?

Many people hold the belief that if someone's future life would be worse enough to be not worth living, then we have a strong moral obligation not to bring that individual into existence. Conversely, the fact that someone's future life would be well worth living does not provide us with a moral reason to bring them into existence. These two beliefs give rise to what is referred to as "An Alleged Asymmetry" (Algander & Berndt Rasmussen, 2019). Thus, we display a much greater sensitivity to the suffering of others as opposed to their well-being. However, is this perspective justifiable? Does the well-being of individuals truly hold no significance in comparison to their suffering?

I argue that this perspective is deeply problematic. We show more empathy towards others' suffering than their happiness because the former serves as a reminder that some individuals are in need of

assistance, and if we fail to address this tragedy, we will experience guilt. On the other hand, the latter implies that these individuals' lives and the world are already satisfactory, leading to less urgency to take action. While it makes some sense that individuals who are worse off deserve more help than those who are better off, it does not negate the importance of well-being. The priority of reducing suffering appears to be greater than that of improving well-being. This is because once harm is inflicted, it becomes challenging to compensate for it, while there are numerous opportunities to benefit others if the current chance is missed. Furthermore, if we fail to enhance people's well-being, it is possible for others to step in and do so. The intensity of our desire to perform acts of benevolence depends not only on their consequences but also on their difficulty, urgency, and the potential consequences of inaction. Consequently, there is a possibility that an individual's obligation to enhance well-being may be underestimated. If we can imagine the experience of bringing potential people into existence, who will have lives that are well worth living, we would know that it entails the consequence of fostering love, smiles, the enjoyment of fresh air, beautiful sunshine, and meaningful friendships. When this vivid picture is presented to us, it generates a stronger desire and a heightened sense of obligation to bring them into existence.

When certain philosophers (David Benatar, 2006, pp. 40-41; 2013, pp. 122-126) argue that we cannot benefit someone by bringing him into existence, they are referring to comparative benefits. In other words, a benefit is only relevant if the alternative outcome would have been worse for us. If we never existed, there would be no basis to compare this fact as better or worse (Parfit, 2017, p. 131).

Conversely, Parfit believes that benefits can be intrinsic and inherently good. Consider *Case One*, some possible outcomes are (Parfit, 2017, p. 142):

D: Mary will live to 70	Kate will live to 50	_____	_____
E: _____	Kate will live to 60	Ruth will live to 25	_____
F: _____	_____	Ruth will live to 30	Jill will live to 10

When comparing outcomes D and E, regardless of which one we choose, Kate will undoubtedly exist. Therefore, according to our definition, she is an actual person. On the other hand, the existence of Mary and Ruth is uncertain, making them potential people. If potential people have no moral weight, outcome E would be preferable to D because we only need to consider Kate's benefit, not Mary's or Ruth's. Similarly, when evaluating outcomes F and E, F would be better than E for the same reason. However, asserting that F is better than D is highly implausible. Thus, potential people also have moral weight.

Besides, if non-existence is not considered a loss, then is the death of a fertilized egg at the moment of its existence a loss (assuming that if it had not died, it would have had a life well worth living)? Some individuals may contend that it is indeed a loss for the egg. However, this notion appears peculiar to

us—what is so exceptional about this limited and embryonic being that it should take priority? If someone argues that the priority only begins after several years, we are compelled to question the specifics: when exactly does this priority commence? Why five years and not four or six?

Based on the preceding discussions, I contend that the Asymmetry, which relies on a fallacious intuition, is unreasonable. We ought to assign at least some moral weight to potential people. Now, we are confronted with a single question: How much moral weight should be given to potential people—equal to or less than that of actual people?

3.2 The Two-Tier View and the No-Difference View

The Two-Tier View posits that when faced with a moral choice, potential people should be given some, but less, moral weight than actual people, while the No-Difference View argues for giving them the same moral weight. The non-identity fact does not create a morally relevant difference (Parfit, 2017, p. 123).

To defend the No-Difference View, Parfit (2011, p. 220) introduces the concept of a "general person." For instance, consider the case,

> The 14-Year-Old Girl. This girl chooses to have a child. Because she is so young, she gives her child a bad start in life. Though this will have bad effects throughout this child's life, his life will, predictably, be worth living. If this girl had waited for several years, she would have had a different child, to whom she would have given a better start in life (Parfit, 1984, p. 358).

In this case, both children, whether born when the girl was 14 or 24, are her first child. However, if the girl had delayed procreation, it would have been better for her first child. When Parfit uses the term "both," it signifies that the two children share the same relationship with their mother. Yet, this relationship is not the essence of their existence, as they possess different biological and psychological attributes. Thus, it cannot serve as justification.

Parfit asserts that we should assign the same moral weight to the children in both programs. Conversely, David Heyd (2014, p. 9) challenges this idea, questioning why any moral weight should be given to these "general persons" if they are not specific individuals. Heyd contends that potential people should not be given any moral weight at all, differing from Parfit's perspective.

I respectfully dissent from Heyd's viewpoint and argue for assigning equal moral weight to potential people. Consider *Case Two*, some possible outcomes are (Parfit, 2017, p. 142):

A: Tom will live to 60	Dick will live to 80	_____
B: Tom will live to 80	_____	Harry will live to 60
C: _____	Dick will live to 60	Harry will live to 80

On the Two-Tier View, the comparison of benefits between Tom in outcome B and Dick in outcome A indicates that the moral significance of Tom's existence as an actual person outweighs the potential

existence of Dick and Harry. Therefore, B is deemed superior to A. Similarly, the moral weight assigned to C surpasses that of B, and in turn, A is considered more morally significant than C. However, this line of reasoning leads to a logical impossibility.

Temkin (2012, pp. 427-434) raises an objection to *Case Two*, contending that when only outcomes A and B are possible, B is preferable to A. Similar reasoning applies to the comparison of B with C and C with A. This non-transitive relationship of "better than" becomes evident when considering all possible outcomes. In this scenario, regardless of the Two-Tier View standards, outcomes A, B, and C can be deemed equally good. The same argument can be extended to challenge *Case One*.

In contrast, Parfit disagrees and asserts that the evaluative status of outcomes A, B, and C remains consistent, even when only two outcomes are feasible. He argues that their evaluation "does not depend on whether we could bring them about" (Parfit 2017, p. 142), implying a rejection of the Two-Tier View. Even if Temkin emphasizes the distinction between the rights of actual and potential people, Parfit perceives this as a form of discrimination.

If we consider the welfare of actual people to be more important than that of potential people, we might also believe that present people should have priority over future individuals. This moral intuition is influenced by the fact that we can perceive the existence of current individuals more vividly than that of potential ones. Moreover, since the actions we take today contribute to the existence of future individuals (as exemplified by the butterfly effect discussed in the previous footnote), we may find ourselves justifying many "unacceptable" behaviors towards future generations. Consequently, we may be inclined to sacrifice a significant portion of the welfare of future individuals in favor of the present population. It is important to note that future individuals cannot reasonably hold us accountable, as their existence is contingent upon our current behaviors, such as pollution and resource depletion. Parfit argues that if our successors were to adopt the same perspective with regard to their own offspring, and subsequent generations continued this pattern...ultimately, it would lead to the downfall of the human race.

Additionally, this hierarchy of priority may extend to favoring one's present self-interest over that of the future self, leading to a worsening situation over time.

One more question, are potential people and actual people essentially different? Let's consider two scenarios:

- Imagine going back several decades and having the opportunity to decide whether to bring 10 people, whose lives would now be well worth living, into existence or not. Assume you don't know these individuals personally, but you have observed them for a long time and possess a vivid understanding of their lives. However, if you choose their existence, you will have to make a sacrifice.
- Now, you have the chance to decide whether to bring 10 people, whose lives will be well worth living, into existence or not. Again, selecting their existence requires making a sacrifice.

In which scenario should you make a greater sacrifice? Most people would probably choose the first scenario. Surprisingly, the two scenarios are essentially the same. When going back several decades,

those 10 people were also potential people. However, knowing them and their lives vividly makes us perceive them as actual people. Why is there such a difference? In scenario 2, when we do not perceive or feel their existence, we tend to consider them as unreal and overlook much of their significance. This demonstrates the irrationality of human nature. If we could foresee what different possible worlds would be like based on the choices made now, we would also perceive those potential people as actual people, and scenario 2 would be equally preferable to scenario 1.

Furthermore, it is important to note that all of us, including those we care about, at some point, may only exist as potential people rather than actual people. If the parents of someone we care deeply about made certain decisions before the individual's birth that led to them not being born (assuming their life would have been well worth living), wouldn't we feel great sorrow? This sorrow stems not only from the significant impact their absence would have on our lives due to our interactions with them but also from the inherent importance of their welfare.

However, despite the aforementioned arguments, many individuals firmly express that they would rather have fewer or no children in order to improve their own or their parents' lives. It seems that the welfare of actual people is clearly more important. But drawing such a hasty conclusion is too simplistic. The majority of people consider their already born children to be more important than their future intended children because of their shared experiences and established family bond. And the future intended children are deemed more important than potential children who would be born if different choices were made in the past, as we will eventually share many experiences with the former and establish a family bond. Therefore, we can only conclude that the welfare of actual people related to the decision-maker is more important than that of potential people. If we were comparing the welfare of actual people unrelated to us and the welfare of potential people unrelated to us, this preference would not easily arise.

Based on the discussions above, I believe that we should assign equal moral weight to potential people and actual people. Therefore, an impersonalist solution to the non-identity problem should be advocated for. One of its versions is the Impersonal Total Principle. In the subsequent section, I will examine two main objections against the Impersonal Total Principle.

4. Two Primary Objections to the Impersonal Total Principle

In the non-identity problem, if we appeal to the Impersonal Total Principle, everything seems simple: the acts under scrutiny are considered wrong because they fail to maximize utility. However, this explanation is insufficient as it faces two main objections.

4.1 Too Strong of a Moral Requirement

Philosophers such as Davidson (2008, p. 479) and Benatar (2000) argue that the Impersonal Total Principle imposes moral requirements that are excessively demanding. For instance, failing to promote the overall good is fundamentally different from harming or wronging a specific individual. While it is easy to understand our obligation not to harm others, the obligation to promote the well-being of others

is deemed excessively demanding and impractical. Furthermore, critics argue that an impersonalist response may also conflict with legal liability, prompting ethical considerations. For example, should a doctor be held liable simply because of a failure to remind a mother in a non-identity case to delay procreation? These concerns raise poignant questions about the feasibility and practicality of the Impersonal Total Principle.

However, I believe this objection overlooks a crucial point. While reducing suffering is indeed more urgent and deserving of attention than promoting overall well-being, this does not mean that well-being is entirely unimportant. If a person's well-being is considered to be completely unimportant compared to reducing suffering, then wouldn't it be better to have as few people as possible in the world (considering that no matter how worthwhile one's life may be, he will inevitably experience some suffering)?

Besides, the main point of this paper is not to argue that we have a *strong* obligation to enhance the well-being of others; rather, it suggests that this obligation is *weak*. In other words, the Impersonal Total Principle guides us towards the best course of action, but it does not imply a strong obligation to carry it out. As mentioned earlier, the level of obligation to perform a benevolent act depends not only on its consequences but also on factors like its difficulty, urgency, and the potential consequences of inaction. All things considered, the Impersonal Total Principle does not impose moral requirements that are excessively demanding in practice.

Lastly, if the aforementioned doctor failed to remind the mother simply because he disregarded the well-being of others, then we may reasonably criticize his action. Although his behavior is morally wrong, it has not reached a highly severe level. Therefore, in judicial practice, his action should not be deemed illegal.

4.2 The Repugnant Conclusion

For Same Number Cases, all versions of the Impersonal Principle hold true. However, in Different Number Cases, where a different number of people would exist in different outcomes, the Impersonal Total Principle implies The Repugnant Conclusion:

> "For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better even though its members have lives that are barely worth living" (Parfit 1984, p. 388).

As the name suggests, Parfit finds the conclusion rather repugnant. The Repugnant Conclusion triggered heated debates, partly due to a deeply rooted belief: for thousands of years, the human race has always been striving for a better life. For this purpose, some countries—such as China—have even implemented population control policies.

4.2.1 Avoiding the Repugnant Conclusion--The Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle

To avoid the Repugnant Conclusion, Parfit (2017, p. 150) introduces *Case Three:* two possible outcomes are:

A: Tom will live to 40 Dick will live to 40

B: Tom will live to 80 _____

He argues that most people believe outcome B is better. This belief does not stem from the idea that, as a potential person, Dick is less important than the actual person Tom. Parfit refutes the Two-Tier View, arguing that it is incorrect.

If there is still some doubt, let's consider my new version, *Case Four:* two possible outcomes are:

A: Tom will live to 40 Dick will live to 40

B: Jim will live to 80 _____

Still, the prevailing belief among most people is that outcome B is better. Parfit explains this by suggesting that:

> when two outcomes would give people the same total sum of benefits, it would be in one way better if these benefits were shared equally between fewer people (Parfit, 2017, p. 151).

This principle is added to the Impersonal Total Principle, and together makes the

> Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle: One of two outcomes would be in one way better if this outcome would together benefit people more, and in another way better if this outcome would benefit each person more (Parfit, 2017, p. 154).

In the non-identity cases, the acts under scrutiny are considered wrong because they fail to produce a better outcome that benefits individuals and the collective as a whole. However, what happens if there is a conflict between the individual aspect and the collective aspect of the principle? Suppose in *Case Five*, either

A: One million people will exist at level 1,000

or

Z: One hundred billion people will exist at level 1.

According to Parfit (2017, p.157), he asserts that the individual aspect takes precedence and promotes the preference for option A. Parfit's theory suggests that sharing some benefits equally among a smaller number of people holds value, despite necessitating the sacrifice of a certain amount of well-being. Parfit ultimately concludes that the Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle provides the most effective solution for avoiding the Repugnant Conclusion and resolving the non-identity problem.

However, I have three objections.

(1) The Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle strikes me as peculiar and seems to imply a theoretical inconsistency. If both the individual aspect and the collective aspect are important, then neither should have absolute priority. For instance, if we replace option Z with

Y: 1000000000000000000 billion people will exist at level 1.

Is option A still more preferable? If not, then where is the tipping point? Since option Z and option Y only differ in degree, there must be a threshold at which "a certain amount of people will exist at level 1" and it is just as preferable as "one million people will exist at level 1,000." Parfit might argue that the Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle is not perfect, but still the best available.

(2) Furthermore, the Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle leads to what he calls the Mere Addition Paradox. Let's consider a variant of *Case Five*. Suppose

M: 99 billion people will exist at level 11000/11111.

The quality of life for these individuals is less than 1, but still above 0, indicating that their existence is preferable to non-existence. Therefore, A+M is considered better than A. Furthermore, Z is deemed better than A+M because they encompass an equal amount of welfare, with Z exhibiting greater equality. As a result, Z is considered better than A, which contradicts his principle.

(3) Finally, let's reconsider *Case Four*. Do outcomes A and B truly hold the same level of goodness? Many individuals perceive outcome B as superior due to the perceived misery of living only to the age of 40. They may question whether such a life is truly worth living or not, and whether it would be better not to bring Tom and Dick into existence.

Consider *Case Six*, two possible outcomes are:

A: Tom will live to 150 Dick will live to 150

B: Jim will live to 300 _____

I believe many people would consider outcome A to be better. However, this does not demonstrate that it would inherently be better if the same total of benefits were distributed among more individuals. Outcome A is superior because it contains more goodness. Given that living to 150 years appears sufficient, living to 300 years cannot make Jim's life twice as good as Tom's or Dick's. Similarly, in *Case Four*, the superiority of outcome B over A does not imply that it would inherently be better if the same total of benefits were distributed among fewer people.

Therefore, I contend that Parfit's argument is invalid.

4.2.2 Reconsidering the Impersonal Total Principle and the Repugnant Conclusion

The Impersonal Principle retains only the total form. I challenge the Impersonalist view's association with the Repugnant Conclusion and question the alleged repugnance of the conclusion itself. My argument derives from the concept that the lives in question possess value beyond mere existence, suggesting that a life considered barely worth living may not be as dreadful as commonly assumed.

The Impersonal Total Principle suggests that we should maximize total welfare (W), which is calculated as the total population (P) multiplied by the average quality of life (Q) experienced by individuals.

$W = P \times Q$.

In the current context, I contend that a significant decrease in P does not result in a proportional increase in Q. Moreover, as P increases, Q initially decreases slowly but then decreases rapidly after reaching an inflection point. Therefore, it is essential to determine the location of this inflection point. I argue that Q at the inflection point is not excessively low, and thus the Repugnant Conclusion cannot be reached.

The Repugnant Conclusion presupposes that a desirable life must consume a significant amount of resources, and I believe this assumption is incorrect.

First, let's consider a scenario where there are only one billion individuals on Earth, each consuming seven times the average amount of natural resources as compared to us. It is not difficult to imagine such a lifestyle, as there are already many people who consume seven or even seventy times more resources than the average person. However, their quality of life is not necessarily seven times higher. Few individuals would be willing to trade seven years of their lifespan for just one year of such a seemingly superior existence. Perhaps some people, like drug addicts, might be willing to sacrifice their health for the temporary pleasure of substance abuse, but this behavior is generally considered irrational by most individuals.

Another example is the comparison between America and Europe. Despite America consuming a comparable amount of natural resources, especially non-renewable resources, as Europe, which has twice the population, it does not necessarily mean that Americans enjoy a life quality that is twice as high as Europeans.

In the context of our current world population, consuming a significantly larger amount of natural resources does not necessarily result in a proportional increase in overall welfare. Many of the challenges we face stem not from a scarcity of natural resources, but rather from unjust distribution and our heavy reliance on sensory pleasures, which often prioritize material possessions excessively.

Secondly, if we have a comparatively larger population, with each person consuming significantly fewer natural resources, our quality of life may not be as dire as previously assumed.

Consider a scenario where each member of Leon's family earns half as much as others. One might imagine life in such a family to be extremely challenging: residing in a small house, engaging in laborious work, facing social disdain from neighbors, and lacking the financial means to participate in group activities with friends. This portrayal may lead to the belief that a lower population is necessary to avoid such misery. However, it would be unfair to draw such a conclusion without considering a distinction between natural and non-natural resources.

When assessing resources, it is essential to differentiate between natural and non-natural resources. The Repugnant Conclusion suggests that to sustain a larger population, individuals must consume fewer natural resources. Yet, the perceived misery in the aforementioned scenario does not solely result from reduced consumption of natural resources; rather, it arises from limited access to non-natural resources. This limitation may lead to diminished educational opportunities, reduced prospects for success, and decreased competitiveness in the job market. In a materialistic society like China, individuals in such circumstances may face social ostracization, and a boy from such a family may struggle to find a suitable partner for marriage.

Consider the implications of reduced consumption of natural resources on people's lives. It is not difficult to envision a situation akin to that of the 1980s in China, where few individuals owned cars, cellphones, or computers, and the consumption of concrete, iron, and cement was minimal. Despite this, life was not necessarily less fulfilling. People had more time to spend with family and friends, pollution levels were lower, leading to better health, and reduced dependence on medical resources. Additionally,

competition was less intense, and social relationships were simpler. When placed into contrast, is working overtime in a skyscraper truly superior to working in a craftsman's workshop? Does using a cellphone in your bedroom genuinely bring more happiness than conversing with villagers in the sunshine? In a community where everyone shares limited natural resources, life may not seem as arduous. It is evident that a fulfilling life does not necessarily hinge on extensive natural resource consumption. Bhutan serves as a pertinent example; despite low per capita resource consumption, it ranked eighth in the world and first in Asia in the Global Happiness Index of 2006.

Based on the preceding discussion, a population increase or a desire for numerous future generations may be sustainable with minimal per capita natural resource consumption while still maintaining an acceptable standard of living. This standard of living necessitates only basic and limited natural resources, such as food, which I believe represents the aforementioned inflection point. However, once the population surpasses this inflection point and continues to increase substantially, our quality of life is likely to decline significantly, thus undermining the maximization of overall welfare.

Therefore, under the premise of maximizing utility, adopting a resource-efficient lifestyle would allow for a significantly larger population while still leading a life that is well worth living. Conversely, adhering to our current inefficient resource consumption patterns would necessitate a smaller population for utility maximization, lest our existence be deemed barely worth living.

Additionally, a life barely worth living may not be as dreadful as commonly perceived. It surpasses the standard of living that merely justifies euthanasia, as the latter not only implies ceasing to increase one's well-being or suffering but also signifies the annihilation of one's own existence. Therefore, in most cases, the corresponding life standard is far inferior. The former corresponds to a life of "no pain, no happiness," merely perpetuating existence without adding substantial value. It differs from the life of a vegetative state, as it lacks the suffering associated with being trapped in such a state of confinement, both physically and mentally. It is marginally worse than a cycle of eat-sleep-eat-sleep. Hence, the Repugnant Conclusion may not be truly repugnant.

Consequently, either the Impersonal Total Principle cannot lead to the Repugnant Conclusion or the seemingly "repugnant" conclusion is not really repugnant at all.

4.2.3 Is the Impersonal Total Principle still unacceptable?

However, some may argue that the Impersonal Total Principle is unacceptable as it suggests sacrificing our own life quality to bring more individuals into existence whose lives are worth living. Throughout centuries, we have strived to enhance our average standard of living. Technological advancements, infrastructure development such as roads, bridges, and factories—all of these result in increased consumption of natural resources. Therefore, adhering to the life corresponding to the aforementioned inflection point may seem like a regression.

I believe this view stems from an inaccurate moral intuition, rooted in our inherent selfishness. Most individuals are unwilling to make significant sacrifices for the existence of others, let alone potential individuals. People build a 'moral isolation wall' within their hearts since there are already numerous

demands on their resources, and it is impossible to constantly engage in acts of selflessness. For example, while someone with a billion dollars may be willing to donate a million, it is highly unlikely they would donate 99.99% and equalize their wealth with the average person's, even if this would create the greatest utility in the world.

This inaccuracy also arises from our tendency to overemphasize suffering while overlooking the value inherent in the existence of others. As discussed above, individuals are typically more sensitive to the suffering experienced by others rather than their happiness, leading to an overestimation of the threshold for a life worth living. We are capable of imagining a 'life corresponding to the inflection point,' but it is difficult to envision the lives of billions of people. For instance, a Bhutanese citizen consumes less than half the natural resources of an American. However, does an American's existence hold twice the value of two Bhutanese individuals? When we compare a few individuals, our intuitions guide us. However, when comparing seven billion to ten billion, it becomes an abstract number. If we were to love everyone as we would God, and truly imagine the lives of potential individuals, what valid reasons might we have to reject a scenario in which a greater number of people experience a relatively good life in this world?

5. Conclusion and Reflection

The non-identity problem hinges on the moral weight of potential people and the extent of this moral weight. In Section 3, I addressed the Alleged Asymmetry and pointed out that it is based on a fallacious intuition. Bringing potential people into existence can benefit them, as their existence contains as much goodness as that of actual people, thereby giving them similar moral weight. Therefore, I advocate appealing to impersonalism to resolve the non-identity problem, specifically the Impersonal Total Principle. This principle does not impose an excessively high moral requirement, as the intensity of our obligation to promote overall good depends not only on its consequence, but also on factors such as difficulty, urgency, and the repercussions of inaction. Furthermore, it does not lead to the Repugnant Conclusion, which would suggest a life barely worth living.

There is a prevailing belief that we should prioritize making people happier over creating more happy people, leading to a theoretical compromise under Parfit's Wide Dual Person-Affecting Principle, rendering it inconsistent. This paper does not seek to debate the urgency of making people happier versus creating more happy people in our current era for welfare maximization. However, at the very least, this research highlights the importance of considering the welfare of potential people. Blindly reducing the population for the sole purpose of maximizing average welfare is not advisable.

Finally, based on my analysis, I propose adopting a resource-conserving lifestyle akin to that of the Bhutanese, which may contribute to a sustainable future for potential individuals, not only in the present generation but also in future generations. Continuing our current lifestyle places future generations in jeopardy. I do not believe this will lead to the Very Repugnant Conclusion, which implies a large population coexisting with substantial suffering. The reduction of natural resources per

person does not necessarily result in increased suffering, as suffering is primarily caused by factors such as unfairness and false ideology. For instance, choosing to be vegetarian not only reduces food consumption but also alleviates the suffering of other creatures without increasing one's own. While I do not expect everyone to adopt such a lifestyle, I believe it is the ethical choice.

References

Algander, P., & Berndt Rasmussen, K. (2019). Asymmetry and Non-Identity. *Utilitas*, *31*(3), 213-230. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0953820818000341

Bayne, T. (2010). In Defense of Genethical Parity. In *Procreation and Parenthood* (pp. 31-56). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199590704.003.0002

Benatar, D. (2000). The Wrong of Wrongful Life. *American Philosophical Quarterly*, *37*(2), 175-183.

Benatar, D. (2006). *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199296422.001.0001

Benatar, D. (2013). Still Better Never to Have Been: A Reply to (More of) My Critics. *The Journal of Ethics*, *17*(1), 121-151. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10892-012-9133-7

Boonin, D. (2008). How to Solve the Non-Identity Problem. *Public Affairs Quarterly*, *22*(2), 129-159.

Cohen, A. I. (2009). Compensation for Historic Injustices: Completing the Boxill and Sher Argument. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, *37*(1), 81-102. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.2008.01146.x

Davidson, M. D. (2008). Wrongful Harm to Future Generations: The Case of Climate Change. *Environmental Values*, *17*(4), 471-488. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327108X368494

Harman, E. (2004). Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating? *Philosophical Perspectives*, *18*, 89-113. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1520-8583.2004.00022.x

Heyd, D. (2014). Parfit on the Non-Identity Problem, Again. *The Law & Ethics of Human Rights*, *8*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1515/lehr-2014-0003

Magnusson, E. (2019). Children's Rights and the Non-Identity Problem. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *49*(5), 580-605. https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2018.1463798

Parfit, D. (1984). *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Parfit, D. (2011). *On What Matters* (Volumes 1 and 2). Oxford: Clarendon Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:osobl/9780199572809.003.0001

Parfit, D. (2017). Future People, the Non-Identity Problem, and Person-Affecting Principles. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, *45*(2), 118-157. https://doi.org/10.1111/papa.12088

Singer, P. (2011). *Practical Ethics* (3rd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511975950

Temkin, L. (2012). *Rethinking the Good: Moral Ideals and the Nature of Practical Reasoning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199759446.001.0001

Notes

Note 1. Different sperm and egg cells would result in the conception of different children. Due to the butterfly effect, people's existence is highly susceptible to events preceding their birth. For example, if a mosquito had bitten your mother when she was supposed to meet and get to know your father at a crossroad, she may have paused, missed him, and ended up marrying someone else. The child she would have given birth to in that scenario would not have been you.

Note 2. Parfit changed his view many years later, as we can see in his last thesis published in 2017.

Note 3. In the context of this paper, "well-being" is used to represent the holistic evaluation of an individual's lifelong happiness and life satisfaction, encompassing emotional contentment, psychological fulfillment, and overall quality of life, without specific consideration of hardship or adversity. On the other hand, "welfare" is employed to signify the calculated net value of an individual's happiness throughout their life, factoring in both positive and negative experiences, including joy and suffering. This distinction is made to clarify the focus on the comprehensive assessment of individual happiness and the specific consideration of both positive and negative aspects of life.