

Phil 108, October 9, 2012
Parfit: The Non-Identity Problem

Our choices can affect *who* exists in the future:

This follows from the:

Time Dependence Claim: If any particular person had not been conceived when he was in fact conceived, it is *in fact* true that he would never have existed,

which is in turn based on the:

Origin View: Each person has the distinctive necessary property of having grown from the particular pair of cells from which this person in fact grew.

Can we benefit by causing to exist?

If we cause someone to exist, who will have a life worth living, do we thereby benefit this person?

- Some may say yes.
- Others may say no. We benefit someone only if it is true that, if we acted otherwise, it would have been worse for her. But if we had not caused her to exist, this would not have been worse for her, since she would not have existed at all.

The Non-Identity Problem

The 14-year-old girl: She has a child whose life is worth living. But if she had waited, then the child she would have had instead would have had a better life.

- It is very natural to think that it would have been better if she had waited. Why?
- If causing to exist can benefit, then she benefits the child.
- Even if causing to exist cannot benefit, the girl's decision was not worse for her child.
- But if the girl's decision is not worse for anyone, what is our objection to it? This is the *Non-Identity Problem*.

Note that the thought that it would have been better if she had waited can be upsetting. It implies that it would have been better if her *actual* child—the one before us now—had never been born and someone else had existed in her place. Parfit writes, though, that if *he* were the actual child of this girl, he could accept this implication.

Depletion vs. Conservation:

- Depletion would make the standard of living slightly higher over the next three centuries.
- But then it would mean that millions of people had a much lower standard of living, but lives still worth living, for several centuries after.
- However, Depletion would also affect who got married, and when children were conceived. As a result, completely different people would come into existence.
- So Depletion is not worse for these people, and it may even benefit them.
- Depletion is bad, but is not bad for anyone.
- The Non-Identity Problem again: What is the moral reason not to choose Depletion?

Perhaps our response should be to deny that a choice, or outcome, must be bad *for* someone in order to be *bad*. This is denied by 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 would have lived.

Can rights solve the Non-Identity Problem?

An alternative solution: Children have a right to a good start in life. The 14-year-old girl does not *violate* her actual child's right, because she *could not have fulfilled* that child's right. But she does bring the child into existence knowing that its right will go unfulfilled. And that is wrong to do.

Reply: "When we cannot ask for someone's consent, we should ask instead whether this person would later regret what we are doing." *Question*: Is this always sufficient? (Keep this in mind when we turn to Shiffrin.)

Reply: It is implausible that we violate *rights* in *Lesser Depletion*. In that case, we give minor benefits to ourselves when we could have given much greater benefits to future people, but the future people are still better off than we are. This may be wrong to do, but not because it violates rights.

Does it matter at all that it won't be worse for anyone?

The *No-Difference View* says that it does *not* matter at all.

The:

Person-Affecting View (V): It would be worse if people are affected for the worse. implies that it does matter.

Pregnancy treatment vs. Preconception treatment:

- We must cancel one treatment.
- Pregnancy treatment causes 1,000 children to be healthy rather than handicapped.
- Preconception treatment causes 1,000 healthy children to exist rather than 1,000 handicapped children to exist.
- The difference: If we cancel pregnancy treatment, it will be worse for 1,000 children. But if we cancel preconception treatment, it will *not* be worse for *any* children.
- Does it matter?
- V says yes; the No-Difference View says no.

Review Questions:

1. "If no one has a valid complaint about how he or she was treated by what you did, then what you did wasn't wrong." Explain how the case of conservation vs. depletion puts this claim into question.
2. Recall, from Singer, some problematic actions:
 - a. Increasing population so that average welfare is lower, even though the sum of welfare is higher.
 - b. Killing moderately happy people and replacing them with new very happy people, so that the sum of welfare is higher.

c. Bringing into the world a child who will live only a few years in extreme pain, with severe disabilities, which is not worse for any already existing person. Why are these cases problematic for the Total and Prior Existence Views? Are they similarly problematic for Parfit's Same Number Quality Claim? Explain.