

### The Non-Identity Problem

- 3 kinds of choices:
  1. *Same-person choices*: in which the same people will exist regardless of how one acts. Most moral theory has discussed these.
  2. *Different-people choices*: in which different people will exist depending on one's action(s). Two varieties:
    - a. *Same number choices*: where you have different people but the same number of people
    - b. *Different number choices*: where you have different numbers of people.
- The Non-Identity Problem: How should we make same-number choices? In particular, does it make a moral difference that different people would exist? See examples below.

### The Future Persons Paradox

This is an argument for the counterintuitive conclusion that we have no obligations to future generations. Parfit seeks to avoid this. Premises:

- The "time-dependence claim": If any particular person had not been conceived at about the time they were in fact conceived, then they would never have existed.
- An action is wrong only if it harms someone.
- Non-existent people cannot be harmed.

Conclusion: We have fewer obligations to future generations than previously thought (see below).

#### *The 14-year-old girl*

This girl wants to have a baby. If she has a baby now, the baby will be much worse off than if she waited several years. However, the child will still have a life worth living. The girl decides to have a baby now.

Q: Is her action wrong? Why?

#### *An Argument:* (the future persons paradox)

1. An action is wrong only if it harms someone other than the agent.
2. The 14-year-old girl's action harms no one other than herself. For
  - a. It does not harm her child, since her child would not have existed otherwise. (The Time-Dependence Claim)
  - b. It does not harm the child she *would have had*, since that child doesn't exist.
3. Therefore, her action is not wrong.

#### *Depletion*

Assume that we (society) have a choice of two policies, Depletion and Conservation. If we choose Depletion, we will have slightly better lives for the next 200 years, as a result of consuming natural resources more quickly. After that time, people will have *much* lower quality of life, due to the depletion of resources. If we choose Conservation, we will have less benefit now, but future generations (after 200 years from now) will be much better off. Suppose we choose Depletion.

Q: Is our choice wrong? Why?

#### *An Argument:* (the future persons paradox)

1. A policy is wrong only if it harms someone.
2. Our policy harms no one. For

- a. It doesn't harm anyone existing now or in the next 200 years.
  - b. It does not harm people existing after that time. (The Time-Dependence Claim)
  - c. It does not harm the people who *would have* existed if we chose Conservation.
3. Therefore, the policy is not wrong.

*Response #1*

Perhaps we have an obligation to produce good. We act wrongly by not producing the better-off people.

*Problem:*

This means the girl acts wrongly if she merely fails to have a child.

*Response #2*

Perhaps people have rights to a certain level of well-being. Perhaps we act wrongly by creating people whose rights won't be satisfied.

*Problems:*

1. These people would probably waive their supposed right.
2. Suppose the people's well-being will be above the level that they have a right to, but still not as great as would otherwise be the case. (See Parfit's Lesser Depletion example.)
3. This implies that it would have been better to produce no one at all (e.g., sterilize everyone after adopting Depletion).

**Parfit's View**

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 than those who would have lived.

- He does not say, however, whether we are *obligated* to produce the better outcome. And this would be hard to defend, for:
  1. The 14-yr-old girl has 3 options:
    - a. Have a child in several years, who will have a good start in life.
    - b. Have a child now, who will have a poor start.
    - c. Have no child.
  2. (c) is permissible.
  3. (b) is better than (c).
  4. Therefore, (b) should also be permissible. At least, (b) cannot be wrong merely because it is worse than (a).

## I. Evaluating Worlds: Population & Well-Being

- Is it good to make more people (whose lives are worth living)?  
What if doing so lowers the average quality of life?
- Example: Two worlds:
  - A: A world of 1 million people, with a welfare level of 100. (Very high)
  - Z: A world of 1 billion people, with a welfare level of 1. (Barely worth living)

Which world is better?



Most people say A.

### *Two Principles for Assessing Goodness*

- *The Average Utility Principle*: The best world is the world in which the average level of well-being is highest.
- *The Total Utility Principle*: The best world is the world in which the *total* utility is highest.
- Most people accept neither of these principles. Perhaps the truth is something in between.

### *The Repugnant Conclusion*

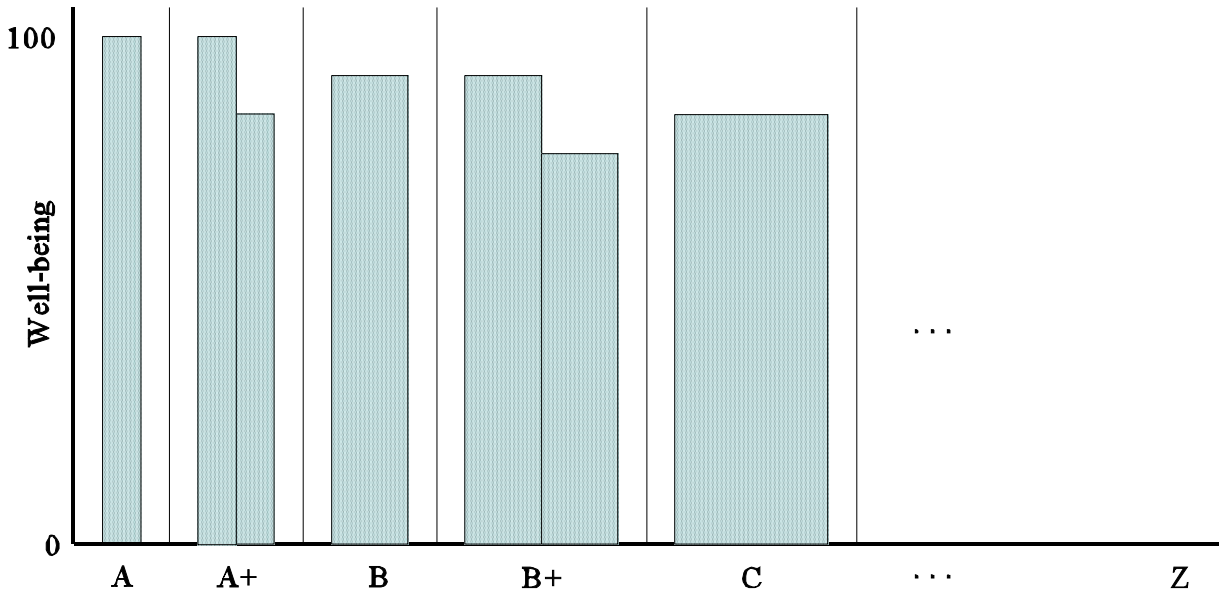
For any population of people with a very high quality of life, there is some much larger imaginable population whose existence would be better, even though its members would have lives barely worth living. (In brief: Z is better than A.)

- This follows from the Total Utility Principle.
- Parfit thinks this is “repugnant.”

## II. The Mere Addition “Paradox”

1. *The Pareto Principle*: If x is better than y for some people, and at least as good as y for everybody else, then x is better than y.
2. *Non-anti-egalitarianism*: If x has a higher total utility than y, and a higher average, and a more equal distribution, then x is better than y.
3. *Transitivity*: If x is better than y and y is better than z, then x is better than z.
4. The “repugnant” conclusion is true. (Z is better than A)

(4) follows from (1)-(3): Imagine the following sequence:



- World A: 1 million people at 100 utils.
- World A+: 1 million people at 100 + 1 million people at 90
- World B: 2 million people at 96 utils.
- World B+: 2 million people at 96 + 2 million people at 86.
- World C: 4 million people at 92.
- ...
- World Z: Very large number of people at 1.

- ⊣ A+ is better than A. B is better than A+. B+ is better than B. Etc.
- ⊣ Conclusion: Z is better than A.

### III. Against the Average Utility Principle

- This implies that the world would have been better if all but the most ecstatically happy people didn't exist. Does this mean that it would be good if everyone else died (painlessly)?
- It implies that you can worsen the world by adding something good to it (and not changing anything else). How can this be? Nothing else works like this.
  - Value of an individual life is not determined by the average level of well-being over time. (It's not better to have 1 second of ecstasy and then die, than to have 100 years of mere contentment.)
  - Value of art is not determined by the average level (so that it's better to have 1 masterpiece and destroy everything lesser).
- Parfit's Hell example. Adding a number of people with horrible lives (welfare < 0) could improve the world. This follows from the AUP.
- The sadistic conclusion: Sometimes, it is better to add a number of unhappy people to the world, rather than adding a larger number of happy people. This follows from the AUP.

#### IV. The Symmetry between Time & Space

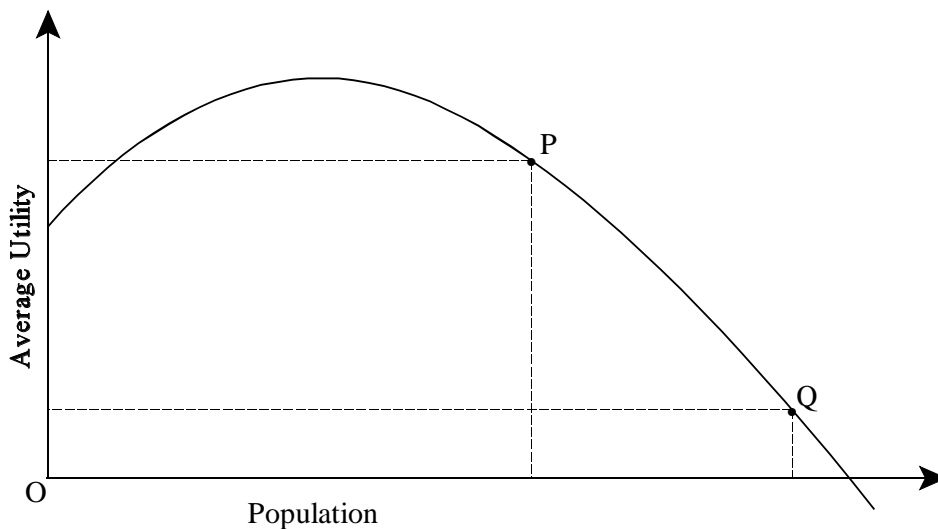
- We think it would be better if more people (whose lives were worth living) were added *later* in time.  
(Analogous to adding more time to an individual life.)
- Analogously, it would be better if more people were added elsewhere in space.

#### V. The Symmetry between Past & Future

- You think it is good that you are alive (provided your life is worth living). It would not be better if you hadn't been born.
- Therefore, before you were conceived, it would have been correct for anyone to say that it would be good to create you.
- Therefore, it is now correct for anyone to say that it would be good to create another person.

#### VI. Practical Consequences

- How many people should we really create?
- Increasing population increases average welfare at first (economies of scale, trade, etc.), then lowers it for very large populations (crowding, shortages, pollution, etc.). See graph:



- Point P: Maximum total utility (=population \* avg. utility).
- Point Q: A world with high population, low avg. utility. Much worse than P.
- If the Total Utility Principle is true (and it is), we should aim for P. The TUP does not support a Z-like world, given any realistic assumptions.

## I. Background: The Importance of the Debate About Equality

- This has been a large debate for the last century.
- The world was almost destroyed over this argument.

## II. Does Equality Have Instrumental Value?

- Distinguish instrumental vs. intrinsic value.
- *For equality:*
  - The principle of *Diminishing Marginal Utility*: The more money you already have, the less value you get from a fixed-size addition to that wealth.
  - Therefore, given a fixed quantity of wealth, the equal distribution tends to maximize utility.
  - This is an instrumental argument for equality.
- *Against equality:*
  - People respond to incentives: People act to get greater rewards for themselves.
  - Unequal rewards can be used to encourage productive activity.
  - Thus, inequality leads to a greater total quantity of wealth.
  - This is an instrumental argument against equality.
- But not our concern here. Our interest will be in the *intrinsic* value of equality.

## III. Three Fundamental Ethical Theories About Equality (& social justice)

- The three theories:
  1. *Utilitarianism*: Maximize sum of everyone's welfare.
  2. *Individual Rights theory*: Do what you want, within side constraints. Everyone free from interference in certain activities.
  3. *Egalitarianism*: TN runs together two different views:
    - a. *Egalitarianism* proper: Equality of welfare has intrinsic value.
    - b. The *Priority View*: Benefits to the initially worse-off are better than (more important than, have priority over) equal-size benefits to the initially better-off.
- More about these theories:
  1. **Utilitarianism:**
    - Interpretation of equality: Equal consideration of interests.
    - Simple aggregative view: just add together everyone's satisfaction.
    - Problems:
      - \* Counts sadistic desires equally with normal desires.
      - \* Counts desires based on false beliefs.
      - \* But these problems could easily be fixed.
    - Disagrees with egalitarianism: Does not care about how welfare is distributed; only cares about the total. Helping the rich is just as good as helping the poor to the same degree.
  2. **Individual rights theory:**
    - Interpretation of equality: Equal rights.
    - Not aggregative; agent-centered. May not violate rights to secure fewer rights-violations in the future.

- Every individual has a veto power.
- Rights are negative, not positive.
- Disagrees with egalitarianism: Places *side constraints* that prevent the only realistic means to equalization of wealth.

### 3. Egalitarianism & the Priority View:

- Interpretation of equality: Equality of advantages.
- Egalitarianism: Equality of wellbeing is intrinsically good.
- Priority View: Benefit for worse-off person adds more to the value of the world than equal benefit for better-off person.
  - \* An extreme priority view: Rawls. Holds that *any* benefit for a worse-off person outweighs *any size benefit* for any better-off person. The priority is absolute.
  - \* But a prioritarian need not hold such an extreme view.
- Argument for these views?
  - \* Undeserved inequality is unfair.
  - \* Unfairness is bad.

### III. Objection to Egalitarianism: Leveling Down

- Two ways of achieving equality:
  - *Leveling Up*: Raising the welfare of the worse off. (preferred)
  - *Leveling Down*: Lowering the welfare of everyone but the worst off.
- The Leveling Down Objection to egalitarianism:
  1. X is good in some respect, only if X is good *for someone* in some respect. (Premise; the “person-affecting principle”.)
  2. If Egalitarianism, then Leveling Down is good in one respect. (Namely, it creates equality.)
  3. But Leveling Down benefits no one in any respect. (By definition.)
  4. So Leveling Down is not good in any respect. (From 1, 3.)
  5. So Egalitarianism is false. (From 2, 4.)
- Most common response: Move to the Priority View.
  - Notice how the Priority View avoids this. PV rejects (2).
  - PV avoids charges of malevolence: harms to a person are never good in any respect.
  - PV’ists care about everyone. They just care *more* about the worse-off.

### I. Motivations for the Priority View

- Review the Leveling Down Objection.
- Review how the Priority View avoids it.
- Many people find the Priority View plausible.

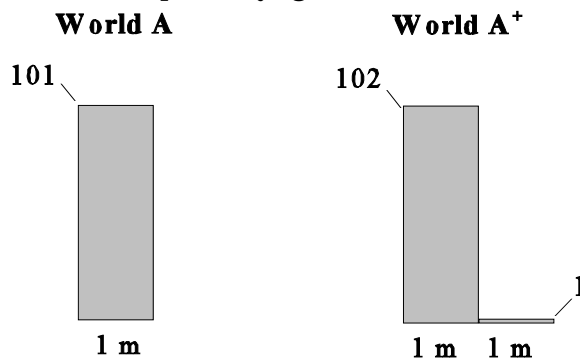
### II. An Argument Against Priority

(1) A+ is better than A.

World A: 1 million people, welfare level 101.

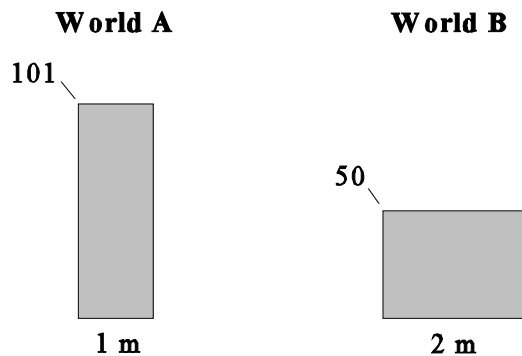
World A+: The same people with welfare level 102, plus 1 million more people with welfare 1.

- A+ is better than A for the Advantaged.
- A+ is better than, or no worse than, A for the Disadvantaged.
- There are no other relevant interests, and no other relevant factors.
- Prioritarian would probably agree with this.



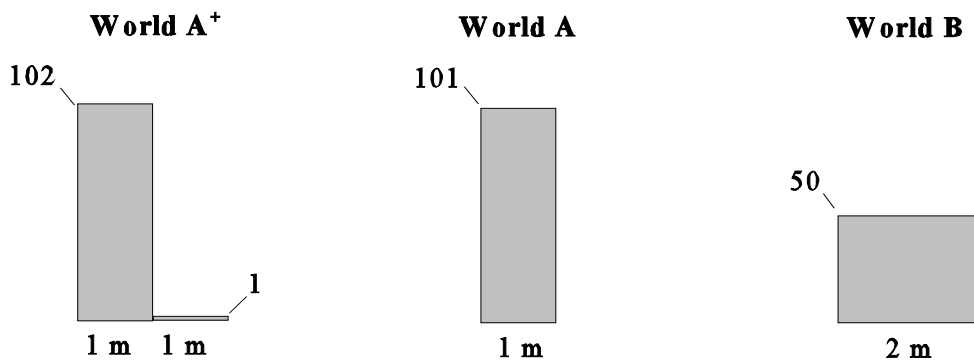
(2) A is better than B.

- A has a higher total utility than B.
- A has a higher average utility than B.
- A has no more inequality than B.
- Every theory in population ethics agrees with this.
  - Opponents of the Repugnant Conclusion would all agree.
  - Even defenders of the RC would agree.



(3) A+ is better than B.

- We've said that A+ is better than A, which is better than B.
- This refutes the Priority View.



*Summary of the argument:*

1. *The Pareto Principle* Suppose you have two possible situations, x and y, where
  - x is better than y *for every* possible individual who exists in either situation.
  - All people in both situations deserve their benefits (none are undeserving).
  - There are no relevant evaluative differences other than welfare distributions.

Then x is better than y.

2. *The Unrepugnant Premise*: Suppose you have two possible populations, x and y, where
  - x has the higher total utility.
  - x has the higher average utility.
  - x has no more inequality than y.
  - And there are no other relevant evaluative differences.

Then x is better than y.

3. *Transitivity*: Suppose x is better than y, and y is better than z. Then x is better than z.

4. *Conclusion*: The priority view is false.

### III. Objection: The Repugnant Conclusion

- The argument has 2 of the 3 premises needed for the Repugnant Conclusion. The RC can be derived from three premises:
  - The Pareto Principle
  - Transitivity
  - Non-anti-egalitarianism
- This might cause suspicion on the argument.
- One could try to deny non-anti-egalitarianism.
- Instead, I would embrace the RC.

### IV. Transitivity

- The Money Pump Argument
  - Suppose you prefer A to B, B to C, and C to A.
  - You pay a small amount of money to trade C for B.
  - You pay a small amount of money to trade B for A.
  - You pay a small amount of money to trade A for C.
  - Etc.

- The Symmetry argument
  - Suppose  $A > B > C$ .
  - Two principles:
    - \* *Dominance Principle* if  $x_1 > y_1, \dots, \text{ and } x_n > y_n$ , then  $(x_1 + \dots + x_n) > (y_1 + \dots + y_n)$
    - \* *Irreflexivity*: Nothing is better than itself.
  - $A+B+C > B+C+A$ . (By Dominance.)
  - But  $A+B+C = B+C+A$ . (By Irreflexivity.)

## V. Equality, Priority, or Nothing?

- Should we move back to Egalitarianism?
- The conclusion of the argument also conflicts with egalitarianism.
- But could an egalitarian deny the Pareto premise?
  - Prioritarians should grant it. But egalitarians don't have the same motivation *from within their theory* to grant it.
  - But the Pareto Principle is very intuitive.
  - Maybe egalitarians could deny it *on the basis of* egalitarianism.
    - \* Because a world that is better for everyone might be less equal.
- Reply: This reopens charges of malevolence.
  - This objection would be stronger than the Leveling Down objection.
    - \* In Leveling Down objection: Egalitarian must hold: sometimes x is better than y *in one respect*, even though x is worse than y for everyone.
    - \* In Pareto Objection: Egalitarian must hold: sometimes x is better than y *overall*, even though x is worse than y for everyone.
  - It is not plausible that we should sometimes prefer equalization that harms even those who are worst off.
- Conclusion: Reject both priority and equality.

**Phil. 1100**  
**Overview of Unit 4**

At the end of unit 4, students should:

Know these concepts:

The Non-Identity problem

Know the main positions of these people:

Parfit

Nagel

Huemer

Know these examples & what they show:

Parfit's Depletion example

Know these theories and principles:

Repugnant Conclusion

Average Utility Principle

Total Utility Principle

Pareto Principle

Transitivity

Egalitarianism

Priority View

Non-anti-egalitarianism

Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility

Leveling down

Be familiar with these arguments:

The Non-Identity Problem & argument against obligations to the future, esp.:

- Why we do not harm future people in Parfit's examples

- Why we do not harm anyone else

- Why we might lack obligations to future generations

- Parfit's view of this

Argument for the "repugnant conclusion" (the "mere addition paradox"), incl. its 3 premises.

At least one objection to the Average Utility Principle

Instrumental argument for equality (diminishing marginal utility, etc.)

Instrumental argument against equality (incentives, etc.)

Leveling down objection

The Pareto argument against the Priority View, incl. its 3 premises.

Money Pump argument