

## UTILITARIANISM AND POPULATION ETHICS

### I. Populations Ethics

#### A. The Non-Identity Problem

##### 1. A Same People Choice (From Parfit 1981, 113)

*The Nuclear Technician.* Some technician lazily chooses not to check some tank in which nuclear wastes are buried. As a result there is a catastrophe two centuries later. Leaked radiation kills and injures thousands of people.

Handicapped Child 1

##### 2. A Different Number Choice (From Parfit, 1981, 114)

*The Risky Policy.* Suppose that, as a community, we have a choice between two energy policies. Both would be completely safe for at least two centuries, but one would have, for the further future, certain risks. If we choose the Risky Policy, the standard of living would be slightly higher over the next century. We do choose this policy. As a result there is a similar catastrophe two centuries later, which kills and injures thousands of people.

Handicapped Child 2

#### B. The Essentiality of Origin

#### C. The Total Principle and Aggregative Utilitarianism

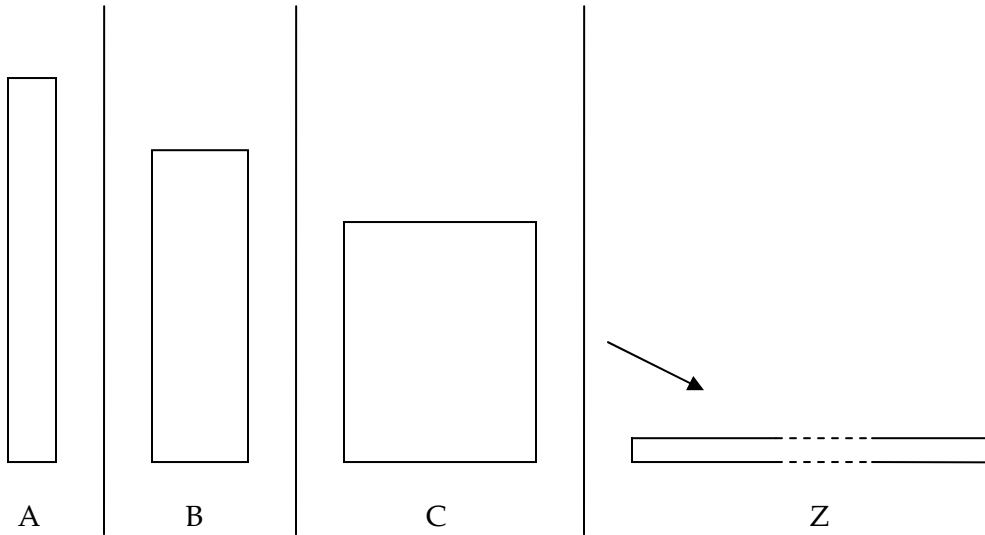
*The Total Principle:* If other things are equal, it is better if there is a greater total sum of utility.

*Aggregative Utilitarianism:* An act is morally permissible if and only if it maximizes aggregate utility.

#### C. The Repugnant Conclusion

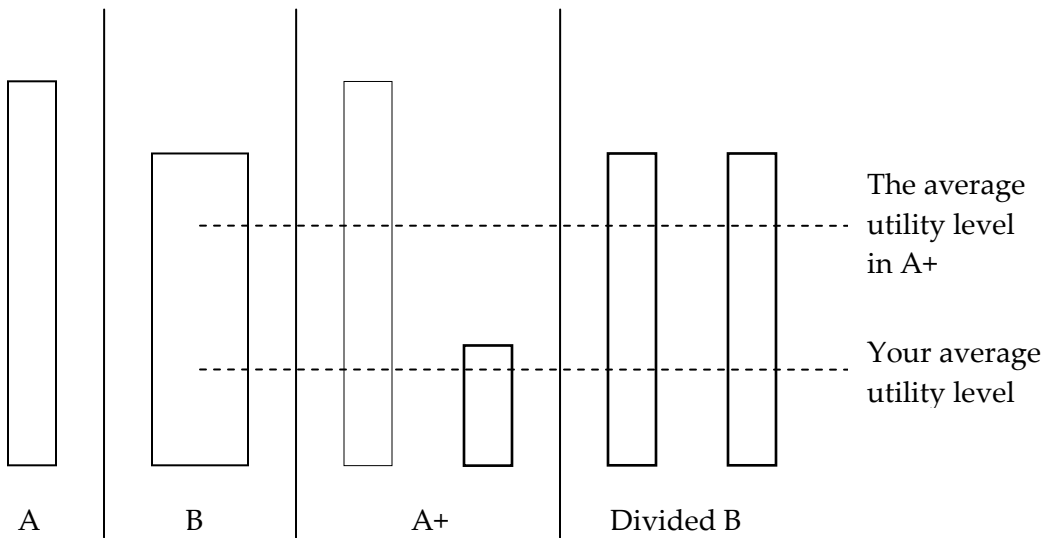
*The Repugnant Conclusion:* Z is better than A.

*The Ridiculous Conclusion:* It is impermissible to act so as to bring about Z instead of A.



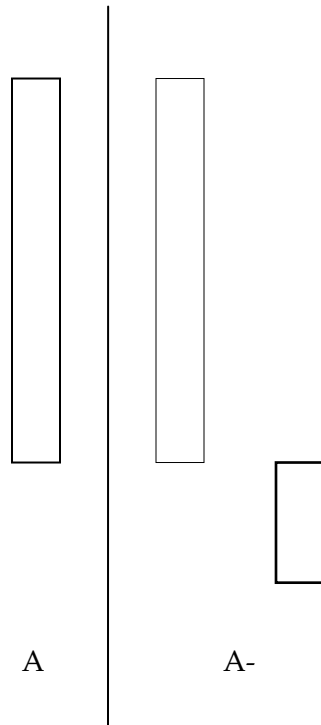
The total principle implies the repugnant conclusion, and aggregative utilitarianism implies the ridiculous conclusion.

#### D. The Mere Addition Paradox



1. Is A+ better than A?

Consider:



Wouldn't you say that A- is worse than A? If so, shouldn't you say that A+ is better than A?

Isn't it better that these other people with lives that are well-worth living exist? The sort of natural inequality that exists in A+ doesn't seem to count against the addition of lives that are well-worth living, especially since we'll assume that the two populations in A+ are not even aware of each other's existence. It might seem that we should prefer A to A+ since the utility level of the worst-off group is higher in A than it is in A+. But there are two ways in which the utility level of the worst-off group could be higher in one situation than in another: (i) it could be higher in one situation than in another because in both situations that group exists and in one of the situations their utility level is higher or (ii) it could be higher in one situation than in another because in one situation the group that is the worst off in one situation doesn't exist in the other situation. The move from A+ to A is a case of (ii), not (i), but it seems that it is only (i) that is a morally good change.

2. Is Divided B better than A+?

Divided B is superior to A+ in terms all of the following: (1) equality, (2) average utility, (3) total utility, and (4) maximin utility (and this is a case of (i), not (ii)).

3. Is B just as good as Divided B?

Assume that the only difference is that whereas there is, in B, one large population on one large planet, there is, in Divided B, two half-sized populations on two half-sized planets.

4. Conclusion

If Divided B is just as good as B, and Divided B is better than A+, then B is better than A+. And it seems that A+ is better than A. Therefore, B is better than A. Further, we can make the same sort of argument for all of the following conclusions: C is better than B, D is better than C, E is better than D, and so on and so forth. Ultimately, then, these arguments lead us to the conclusion that Z is better than A.

- E. Should we reject the repugnant and ridiculous conclusions?

1. Three Different Versions of the Repugnant Conclusion: (i) the conclusion that Drab Z is better than A; (ii) the conclusion that Roller-Coaster Z is better than A, and (iii) the conclusion that Short-lived Z is better than A.

"[T]here are three ways the lives in Z could be barely worth living: (1) they could be drab lives, free of pain but also devoid of all but a few simple pleasures; (2) they could be lives of extreme ups and downs, emotional roller coaster rides, where the ecstasies just barely outweigh the agonies; or (3) they could be lives which are qualitatively identical to those in A but very short-lived. I will refer to these three possibilities as Drab Z, Roller Coaster Z, and Short-lived Z, respectively." (Portmore 1999, 81)

Clearly, we should reject (i), but the total principle does not, as we'll soon see, necessarily entail (i). What's more, it is not so clear that we should reject (ii) and (iii).

2. Superiority in Value and the Repugnant Conclusion

- a. Two Types of Superiority in Value (From Arrhenius 2005, 97)

Let's say that A and B are two types of goods.

*Strong Superiority:* A is strongly superior to B if and only if any amount of A is better than any amount of B.

*Weak Superiority:* A is weakly superior to B if and only if some amount of A is better than any amount of B.

b. Why the Total Principle Does Not Imply (i)

The total principle does not imply (i) if some of the values in A are weakly (or strongly) superior to some of the values in Drab Z.

c. Why we should think that some of the values in A are weakly (or strongly) superior to some of the values in Drab Z

Consider what [Parfit] says in his article 'Overpopulation and the Quality of Life' concerning the analogue of the choice between A and Drab Z within a life, the choice between two futures: (1) the 'Century of Ecstasy', where one lives for a hundred years, all of an extremely high quality; and, (2) the 'Drab Eternity', where one lives forever, but where each year is only barely worth living – although free of pain, these years contain only a few simple pleasures. Parfit claims that although each year of life in the Drab Eternity would be worth living and have value (and given that we are dealing with an infinite number of such years, the Drab Eternity would be of infinite value), the Century of Ecstasy would still be a better life.

How can a life of finite value be better than a life of infinite value? Clearly, at least some of the values which would be realized by a person living the Century of Ecstasy must be [weakly or strongly superior to] the values which would be realised by a person living the Drab Eternity. (Portmore 1999, 85)

3. The Inverted Repugnant Conclusion: Hell Z is worse than Hell A.

Consider *The Two Hells*:

Hell A (Parfit's 'Hell One') is a population consisting of ten people, who each undeservedly suffer terrible agony for fifty years. Their lives are much worse than non-existence, and thus they would all kill themselves if they could. Hell B (Parfit's 'Hell Two') is a population of ten million people, who each undeservedly suffer the same agony for fifty years minus a day (p. 406).

Parfit believes that Hell B is worse than Hell A (p. 406). One way to justify this belief is to claim that a vast increase in the total sum of suffering within a population morally outweighs a very small reduction in the

average suffering per life within a population (p. 406). But this claim implies that there is a Hell Z – an enormous population of people each of whom undeservedly suffer the same great agony for a little less than a day – which would be the worst of all. We are led from the position that Hell B is worse than Hell A to holding Hell Z to be the worst of all by the same parity of reasoning (the same slippery slope type argument) which lead us from the claim that B is better than A to its ultimate implication, that (Short-lived) Z is the best of all. (Imagine Fig. 1 inverted with the blocks labelled Hell A through Hell Z – except, in this case, you should imagine that each subsequent block is not just two, but a million, times wider than the former.) (Portmore 1999, 91)

How can we deny the repugnant conclusion if we accept that Hell Z is worse than Hell A?

#### 4. The Absurd Conclusion

Thus far, we have seen that Parfit is committed to the position that Hell Z is worse than all of its alternatives. Now, unless Parfit holds that there is a difference between the valuation of pleasure and the valuation of pain, he must accept its converse, namely, that Short-lived Z is better than all its alternatives (A being one of its alternatives). In fact, Parfit rejects the view that there is a difference between the valuation of pleasure and pain; Parfit rejects what he calls the ‘Asymmetry’ (the view that states of affairs having a greater quantity of pleasure is of greater value up to a point, but states of affairs having a greater quantity of pain is of limitlessly increasing disvalue) because its acceptance implies the following absurdity:

*The Absurd Conclusion:* For any large population of people almost all of whom have lives that are well worth living – the exceptions being one in every fifty million who through sheer bad luck have lives that are not worth living – there will be some much larger population whose existence would be a worse alternative even though there would be the same prevailing quality of life and proportionally no greater number of unfortunate people. (The limitless disvalue of the increase in the quantity of pain corresponding to the increase in the number of unfortunate people [one for every fifty million added to the population] would eventually come to outweigh the limited value of what is a proportionately greater increase in the quantity of pleasure.) (pp. 410–11) (Portmore 1999, 92-93)

So, it would seem that if we assent to three claims (claims to which Parfit himself assents), namely, (1) that Hell B is worse than Hell A, (2) that there is no point (no quantitative limit) at which an increase in the amount of suffering can no longer be of added disvalue, and (3) that

there is no asymmetry between the valuation of pleasure and pain, then we are obliged, on pain of inconsistency, to accept the Short-lived Z Conclusion. Either we accept that Short-lived Z is better than A or we must deny one of these three claims. If we deny (1), we would have to hold Hell A to be worse than Hell B. If we deny (2), we would have to hold Hell Y to be worse than Hell Z. And, if we deny (3), we would have to accept the Absurd Conclusion. When faced with these alternatives, the Short-lived Z Conclusion seems far less repugnant, that is, if it is repugnant at all. The Short-lived Z Conclusion is, at the very least, 'much less repugnant' than the Drab Z Conclusion; this much Parfit admits.<sup>19</sup> But I believe that one must also admit that it is much less repugnant than the alternative, which is to reject either (1), (2), or (3). (Portmore 1999, 93)

## II. Two Types of Utilitarianism

- A. Aggregative Utilitarianism (AU): An act is morally permissible if and only if it maximizes aggregate utility.
- B. Person-Based Utilitarianism (PBU):

*Person-Affecting Intuition* (PAI): An alternative X is morally permissible if and only if each person is treated in a morally permissible way in X, that is, if and only if no person is wronged in X. (Roberts 2002, 329)

*Exculpating Maximizing Principle* (EMP): p is not wronged in X if there is no alternative Y in which p has more well-being than p has in X. (Roberts 2002, 327)

*Inculpating Maximizing Principle* (IMP): p is (or will be) wronged in X if there is some alternative Y in which p has more well-being than in X and there is no q who does or will exist in Y who has more well-being in X than in Y. (Roberts 2002, 328)

*Exculpatory Counting Principle* (ECP): p is not wronged in X if, for each Y in which p has more well-being than in X, there is some q who does or will exist in X and has more well-being in X than in Y and

- (i) p and q merely reverse positions between X and Y;
- (ii) the number of people who occupy q's position in Y is at least as great as the number of people who occupy p's position in X; and
- (iii) for any r who does or will exist in X and occupies neither p's nor q's position in X or Y, r has at least as much well-being in X as r has in Y. (Roberts 2002, 330)

*Inculpating Counting Principle* (ICP): p is (or will be) wronged in X if there is some Y such that p has more well-being in Y than in X and there is some q who does or will exist in Y and has more well-being in X than in Y and

- (i) p and q merely reverse positions between X and Y;
- (ii) the number of people who occupy p's position in X is greater than the number of people who occupy q's position in Y; and

(iii) for any  $r$  who does or will exist in  $X$  and occupies neither  $p$ 's nor  $q$ 's position in  $X$  or  $Y$ ,  $r$  has at least as much well-being in  $Y$  as  $r$  has in  $X$ . (Roberts 2002, 331)

*Nonexistence Principle (NP)*: For any alternative  $X$  and person  $p$ , if  $p$  does not and will not ever exist in  $X$ , then it is not the case that  $p$  is or can ever be wronged in  $X$ . (Roberts 2002, 331)

### III. Problems for Aggregative Utilitarianism

#### A. The Infinite Population Problem

Example 1 depicts two alternatives,  $A$  and  $B$ , each of which contains person-for-person identical, infinite populations ( $p_1, p_2, \dots, p_\infty$ ). Natural numbers represent levels of individual, overall, lifetime well-being.

*Example 1: Infinite Population Problem*

	A	B
$p_1$	2	1
$p_2$	2	1
...	...	...
$p_\infty$	2	1

In example 1, the amount of total aggregate well-being in  $A$  is exactly the same as in  $B$  (under plausible mathematical assumptions) since both alternatives contain an infinite amount of aggregate well-being. But this means that  $A$  and  $B$  equally maximize aggregate well-being. Thus, [AU] implies that agents may permissibly choose either  $A$  or  $B$ . (Roberts 2002, 320)

PBU, by contrast, implies that agents may not permissibly choose  $B$ . This follows from PAI and IMP.

#### B. The Genesis Problem

Consider two people, Mom and Dad, who have a single child, Victoria. Suppose that Mom does not want to have a second child since having a second child will adversely affect her health. Suppose that whether a second child is produced or not will on a net basis have no effect at all on the levels of well-being of either Dad or Victoria. Suppose, finally, that Mom puts her concerns to the side (perhaps a highly respected philosopher has explained to her what her moral obligations really are) and the couple produce Chuck.

Since the couple in fact does choose to have the second child,  $A$  represents the "road not taken." An asterisk is used to indicate that Chuck does not exist at all in  $A$ ; and Chuck's level of well-being at  $A$  is given as "zero" on the theory that nonexistence is accompanied by neither benefits nor burdens of any kind whatsoever. Alternative  $B$  represents the couple's actual choice.

*Example 2: Genesis Problem*

	A	B
Dad	5	5
Mom	5	3
Victoria	5	5
Chuck	0*	5

Since B contains more aggregate well-being than A does, [AU] is committed to the result that B is better than A and, hence, that B is the morally obligatory choice. (Roberts 2002, 321)

PBU, given NP, avoids the implausible verdict that choosing B over A is morally obligatory. However, PBU, given IMP, implies that choosing B over A is morally impermissible. But it seems to me that this too is an implausible verdict.

C. The Equality Problem

Suppose that the choice to be made is how resources (which are plausibly distinct from well-being) are to be distributed across a given population. Suppose further that there is no particular reason why one member of that population should be accorded more well-being than another. This is not a case, for example, where the choice is whether to reward persons who work hard or punish those who don't in order to give the population at large a strong incentive to work hard and produce additional wellbeing for many. Then:

*Example 3: Equality Problem*

	A	B
p <sub>1</sub>	9	16
p <sub>2</sub>	9	3

Because aggregate well-being in B is 19 and only 18 in A, [AU] implies that B is the morally correct result. But this implication is implausible. (Roberts 2002, 322)

PBU does not imply that it is permissible for agents to choose B over A.

D. The Ridiculous Conclusion Problem

As we saw, AU implies the ridiculous conclusion. PBU, given NP, avoids this implication. But, as we saw above, this may not be such a big problem depending on whether we're imagining Z to be Drab Z or Short-lived Z.

IV. A Problem for Person-Based Utilitarianism: The Non-Identity Problem

PBU implies that there is nothing wrong with the choosing the risky policy or with refusing to wait to conceive a normal child in Handicapped Child 2. The combination of NP and IMP imply that choosing the risky policy and refusing to wait to conceive a normal child are morally obligatory.

Roberts's treatment of Kavka's Slave Child Case. How this case isn't a true non-identity problem case.