

Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion & *can we avoid it?*

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Talk adapted from Dr. Jake Nebel's lecture and Stanford
Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry

Population ethics

- As a field: Considering choices that affect which / how many people will exist
- **How do we quantify what makes one population better off than another?**
 - How do we aggregate individual welfare levels into an overall, population-wide welfare level?

Total view

Other things equal, **it is better if there is a greater total sum** in a population of whatever makes life worth living

Total view → Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion

- “Compared with the existence of **many people who would all have some very high quality of life**, there is some **much larger number of people whose existence would be better**, even though these people would all have **lives that were barely worth living**.” (Parfit)

	10 billion people	9 trillion people	Total welfare
Population A	100		1 trillion
Population Z		2	18 trillion

- According to the total view, Pop Z > Pop A (Repugnant Conclusion)

Average view

Other things equal, **it is better if the average welfare per life** in a population is higher

- This view avoids the Repugnant Conclusion... but at what cost?

Average view → Problem 1: hell

- It follows from this view that it can be good to add lives that are *not* worth living:

	10 people	10 billion people	Average welfare
Hell 1	-100		-100
Hell 2	-100	-99	-99.000000001

- According to the average view, Hell 2 > Hell 1

Average view → Problem 2: Mere Addition Paradox

- It also follows from this view that it can be bad to add lives worth living:

	10 billion people	10 billion more people	Average welfare
Population A	100		100
Population A+	100	50	75

- According to the average view, $A > A+$
- Mere addition being bad seems counterintuitive — we can strengthen this by considering benign addition

More on the Mere Addition Paradox

- If we want to avoid the Repugnant Conclusion, we must say **A > B**:

	10 billion people	10 billion more people	Average welfare
Population A	100		100
Population B	85	85	85

More on the Mere Addition Paradox

- Next, let's compare B with A+ (same population size):

	10 billion people	10 billion more people	Average welfare	Total welfare
Population B	85	85	85	1.7 trillion
Population A+	100	50	75	1.5 trillion

- B has higher average welfare, total welfare, and a more equal distribution that benefits the worse off
- It seems reasonable to conclude that **B > A+**

More on the Mere Addition Paradox

- Recall our conclusions from the previous few slides:
 - $A > B$ (assuming we want to avoid the Repugnant Conclusion)
 - $B > A+$
- So, $A > A+$ (by transitivity of $>$ relation)

	10 billion people	10 billion more people
Population A	100	
Population B	85	85
Population A+	100	50

Ways out of the Mere Addition Paradox?

- It seems like our options are to **reject one of the following**:
 - a. **$A > B$** (accept Repugnant Conclusion)
 - b. **$B > A+$** (but why is B not better?)
 - c. **$A+ > A$** (but how could mere addition be bad?)
 - d. **The “better than” relation is transitive** (interesting can of worms... [Stuart Rachels](#) and [Larry Temkin](#), among others, have done work on this if you’re interested!)

	10 billion people	10 billion more people
Population A	100	
Population B	85	85
Population A+	100	50

Critical level view → Sadistic Conclusion

- Maybe can set a threshold: **it's bad to add lives when they are below a (non-zero) critical level of welfare, c**
 - This avoids the Repugnant Conclusion
- For example, let $c = 10$:

	10 billion people	9 trillion people	Total adjusted welfare (<i>summing difference from $c = 10$</i>)
Population X	-100		-1.1 trillion
Population Y		5	-45 trillion

- According to the critical level view, **Pop X > Pop Y (Sadistic Conclusion)**

Where do we go from here?

- Accept the Repugnant Conclusion?
- Consider another method of calculating population welfare?
- Say that “better than” is not actually transitive?
- Reject the whole premise of interpersonal comparisons of well-being?
- Give up on Theory X altogether?
- Something else?



Thanks! :)

Questions and thoughts?