Indeterminate Dualism Against Repugnance

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Introduction

An indeterminate version of Henry Sidgwick's "Dualism of Practical Reason" may offer a solution to Derek Parfit's "Repugnant Conclusion". Here we will outline the problem of Sidgwick's Dualism and how to resolve it within the framework of practical reason and the problem of Parfit's Repugnance and why it is irresoluble within the framework of pure utilitarianism. Then we will argue how Sidgwick's Dualism, under certain formulations of indeterminacy, specifically under those Indeterminacy Views advanced by David Phillips (and others), implies a resolution to the Repugnant Conclusion that is both intuitive and simple, resolving Sidgwick's Dualism and Parfit's Repugnance in one conceptual move.

Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion

A first important problem that plagues considerations of Practical Reason is the so-called "Repugnant Conclusion". The most famous formulation of the Repugnant Conclusion is made at the end of *Reasons and Persons* by Derek Parfit:

> 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, 390)

In other words, although the temptation may be to increase the average personal welfare of the individual person, it seems instead that one could increase the total welfare by increasing the population while decreasing the average personal welfare down to near-zero. This conclusion seems so "repugnant" because the resulting normative prescription is a world with an arbitrarily high population of persons with arbitrarily near-zero personal welfares.

Although often attributed to Parfit, this problem precedes Parfit, and can be found in its rudimentary form in Henry Sidgwick's discussions of utilitarianism and population ethics:

> …supposing the average happiness enjoyed remains undiminished, Utilitarianism directs us to make the number enjoying it as great as possible. But if we foresee as possible that an increase in numbers will be accompanied by a decrease in average happiness or *vice versa,* . . . the point up to which, on Utilitarian principles, population ought to be encouraged to increase, is not that at which average happiness is the greatest possible (Sidgwick, 415).

Notably, Sidgwick does not worry about the implications of population ethics quite as much as Parfit, nor does Sidgwick take the slippery slope all the way to the Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion, but in some ways Sidgwick does not need to. In Sidgwick's description, the oddness of the conclusion appears long before we reach Repugnance because it seems odd to require

average welfare to decrease in the first place, let alone take it all the way to Repugnance. In this, Sidgwick anticipates Singer's "shallow pond", worrying that we may always be obliged to marginalize our personal welfare to rescue human lives (Singer, 1972).

However, what makes the Repugnant Conclusion difficult is that it is intrinsic to utilitarianism as Sidgwick and Parfit formulate it. One cannot escape the conclusion without rejecting utilitarianism, and yet utilitarianism by itself seems

> We should not try to avoid this conclusion by appealing to principles covering some different part of morality. This conclusion is *intrinsically* repugnant. And this conclusion is implied by the Impersonal Total Principle, which is a particular version of the Principle of Beneficence. (Parfit, 390).

If we take Parfit seriously here, then we have to reject utilitarianism or accept Repugnance. Thus, the Repugnant Conclusion has remained intractable because ethicists declined to do either; utilitarianism is too good and Repugnance is too bad. If utilitarianism must be rejected then, we have an open question: what theory preserves all of the intuitions of utilitarianism but without Repugnance? Parfit calls this the "better version: Theory X" (Parfit, 390). So, what is the "better version"?

Various solutions to the Repugnant Conclusion have been offered, though there seems to be no consensus view on the matter (Arrhenius et al., 2022; Ryberg & Tännsjö, 2004). How to satisfactorily resolve the matter remains a major open question in population ethics.

Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason

A second important problem that plagues considerations of Practical Reason is the so-called "Dualism of Practical Reason" (Sidgwick, xxi and 404). The most famous formulation of the Dualism of Practical Reason can be found in *Methods of Ethics* by Henry Sidgwick.

> …in the rare cases of a recognized conflict between self-interest and duty, practical reason, being divided against itself, would cease to be a motive on either side; the conflict would have to be decided by the comparative preponderance of one or other of two groups of non-rational impulses. (Sidgwick, 508)

In other words, Practical Reason, the rational arrival at best courses of action, does not have a determinate answer and so cases of conflict "between self-interest and duty" must be accommodated for by something additional and "non-rational".

Some have rejected Sidgwick's Dualism because it is an apparent or true dilemma. For instance, Schneewind and Frankena both conclude that the Dualism is an outright contradiction of obligations, resulting in an irreconcilable conflict (Schneewind, 1977, pp. 372-4; Frankena, 1974). Thus, either one of the two horns of the dilemma, either self-interest or duty, must be rejected or Practical Reason itself must be rejected.

Some have rejected Sidgwick's Dualism in favor of one of the two horns. For instance, Kant seems to reject the universalizability of rational self-interest (Kant, 1788). Parfit rejects self-interest on the grounds that personal identity is not a stable category (Parfit, 461-2). De Lazarai-Radek and Singer reject rational self-interest on evolutionary grounds (de Lazari-Radek & Singer, 2012). Alternatively, others, like Hobbes and Hume for instance, have seemingly been satisfied to choose the other horn, embracing rational self-interest and rejecting the rationality of

impartial duty; Aristotle also seems to advance a theory of "self-love" that on some interpretations may be synonymous with rational self-interest (Hobbes, 1651; Hume, 2003/2007; Ross, 1956).

Others, like Copp have embraced Sidgwick's Dualism and rejected the possibility of unifying Practical Reason on the grounds that, for any competing pair of normative standards, reconciliation presupposes a tiebreaking standard which presupposes reconciliation—a vicious cycle (Copp, 1997).

Either way, Sidgwick's Dualism is largely seen to be a problem for Practical Reason that must be resolved in order to give self-consistent, determinate, rational answers to practical questions.

Phillips' Indeterminacy Views

However, David Phillips suggests that Sidgwick's Dualism is ambiguous and has at least two different plausible interpretations. The two major interpretations that Phillips considers are the "Standard" View and the "Indeterminacy" View (Phillips, 1998, pp. 58-59; and elaborated upon elsewhere in Phillips, 2011, pp. 134-140). A third view, "Brink's Externalist View" is also considered, though ultimately set aside (Phillips, 1998, pp. 61-2). Descriptions of the two major interpretations follow.

The Standard View of Sidgwick's Dualism

The view that utilitarianism and egoism are equally obligatory but irreconcilable, and practical reason is therefore contradictory.

As Phillips describes two versions of the standard view:

> According to the first version . . . conflict arises because Sidgwick regards each of these norms [utilitarianism and egoism] as the ultimate norm; but they are different, so cannot both be the ultimate norm. According to the second version of the standard view, the conflict arises not from the norms considered in themselves, but from the norms together with facts" (Phillips, 58-9).

In other words, either because the norms themselves conflict or because the norms plus the relevant associated facts conflict, utilitarianism and egoism are irreconcilably contradictory and practical reason itself is therefore rationally conflicting.

The Indeterminacy View of Sidgwick's Dualism

Phillips offers a set of Indeterminacy Views to resolve the contradiction of practical reason in the Standard View. Of the two views, Phillips seems to have formerly (during *his* article's writing) preferred the first view but presently (contemporaneous with *this* article's writing) prefers the second view.

The Weakly Ultimate Norm View

The view that utilitarianism and egoism are both equally rationally permissible, and practical reason is therefore indeterminate between these two norms.

As Phillips describes this view:

> …both acting as egoism requires and acting as utilitarianism requires are rationally permissible. Another way to put this is that rationality requires that one do either what egoism requires or what utilitarianism requires. (Phillips, 59)

In other words, the norms do not conflict because utilitarianism and egoism are both rationally permissible but neither are rationally obligatory, and therefore practical reason itself is not rationally conflicting but is sometimes rationally indeterminate (in those cases of potential conflict), neither always siding with utilitarianism nor always siding with egoism.

The Defeasible Ultimate Norm View

The view that utilitarianism and egoism are rationally required, except in cases of conflicting requirements, and practical reason is therefore determinate.

As Phillips describes this view:

> …the norm of egoism and the norm of utilitarianism are defeasible ultimate norms. A norm is a defeasible ultimate norm if one is rationally required to do whatever it, in the light of the facts, requires, except in cases where another defeasible ultimate norm generates a conflicting requirement." (Phillips, 60).

In other words, the norms do not conflict because utilitarianism and egoism are both rationally obligatory, but only when they are non-conflicting, and therefore practical reason itself is rationally determinate in those cases in which utilitarianism and egoism agree and rationally indeterminate in those cases in which they disagree (in those cases of potential conflict).

Deproblematizing Dualism

Phillips's Indeterminacy Views, both the Weakly and Defeasible versions, offer a solution to Sidgwick's Dualism. Under Phillips' views, Sidgwick's Dualism is no longer rationally contradictory in cases of conflicting norms but is rationally indeterminate in such cases; Phillips resolves the self-defeating contradiction albeit at the price of toothless indeterminacy.

Against Repugnance

However, if we embrace some form of it, Sidgwick's Dualism can be construed as a solution to Parfit's Repugnance, as long as we accept one of Phillips' views of the former as applied to the latter. In order to illustrate this, we will in turn consider Phillips' views and show that the Standard View fails to resolve Repugnance whereas the Indeterminacy View succeeds in resolving Repugnance. We will compare the results of these different views with respect to a specific case:

> **Pondering Parent**: an individual parent is pondering whether or not to have an additional child with considerations for their own personal welfare and the universal welfare of the population.

The results for the "Pondering Parent" case according to each of Phillips' Indeterminacy Views follow:

Results from the Standard View

Making a decision under the Standard View requires either following utilitarianism, egoism, or both. None of these options provide intuitive results.

Results from Standard Utilitarianism

According to pure utilitarianism, the pondering parent should have an additional child if it increases the universal welfare, regardless of whether it decreases their own personal welfare.

This results in the Repugnant Conclusion being obligatory in many cases, with individual personal welfares obliged to decline to near-zero levels for the sake of the increasing welfare of the increasing population.

Results from Standard Egoism

According to pure egoism, the pondering parent should have an additional child if it increases their own personal welfare, regardless of whether it decreases the universal welfare.

This results in a kind of inverted Repugnant Conclusion, what we can dub the Monstrous Conclusion, in that it bears some resemblance to Nozick's Utility Monster, but for egoism (Nozick, 1999). Whereas the Repugnant Conclusion requires minimum personal welfare for enormous populations, the Monstrous Conclusion requires enormous personal welfare for a population of one. The Monstrous Conclusion may be egoistically obligatory in many cases, ones in which an individual parent can reduce the number of persons overall, which results in the parent's own personal satisfaction but the reduction of the population.

Results from Standard Utilitarianism *plus* Standard Egoism

According to the combined standard egoism and standard utilitarianism view, a pondering parent should have an additional child if it increases the universal welfare, regardless of whether it decreases their own personal welfare; *and*, if it increases their own personal welfare, regardless of whether it decreases the universal welfare.

This combination results in a contradictory position under certain conditions of conflict, between utilitarianism and egoism, because it requires both having and not having the additional child. Utilitarianism requires the Repugnant Conclusion whereas egoism rejects it. Egoism requires the Monstrous Conclusion whereas utilitarianism rejects it.

Results from the Indeterminacy Views

Making a decision under the Indeterminacy View requires either treating utilitarianism and egoism as "weakly ultimate" norms or as "defeasible ultimate" norms. Both of these options provide intuitive results.

Results from the Weakly Ultimate View

Treating utilitarianism and egoism as weakly ultimate norms, a pondering parent should have an additional child if it *either* increases the universal welfare *or* increases their own personal welfare (or both).

This results in a highly permissive population ethics encompassing a wide range of rational decisions from pure egoism to pure utilitarianism only bounded by the permissible domains of egoism and utilitarianism respectively. Utilitarian decisions are always overridable by egoistic decisions; and vice versa, egoistic decisions are always overridable by utilitarian decisions. Any extreme cases of Repugnance or Monstrosity are merely permissible and never obligatory and therefore rare in as much as they exist on the outer bounds of each side of a two-sided permissibility (encountering the extreme conditions of Repugnance or Monstrosity would be akin to encountering all heads or all tails on a series of coin flips). Near-zero personal welfares

whittled away to enormous populations are permissible but never obligatory; and, increasingly personally satisfied parents reducing the numbers of other persons are permissible but never obligatory.

In other words, *Repugnance and Monstrosity are never obligatory*.

Results from the Defeasible Ultimate View

Treating utilitarianism and egoism as defeasible ultimate norms, a pondering parent should have an additional child if it *both* increases the universal welfare *and* increases their own personal welfare.

This results in a weakly obligatory population ethics with a range of obligatory and/or permissible populations in some set of egoistic/utilitarian compatible cases. The set of obligatory results is always limited by the overlap of utilitarianism and egoism together while the set of permissible results is always limited by the bounds of utilitarianism and egoism separately. This result is such that utilitarianism and egoism act in the role of checks and balances upon each other, never allowing one to completely dominate at the expense of the other, and cooperating when possible. Whenever the personal welfare of the individual goes too high at the expense of the universal welfare of the population, it is checked; and vice versa, whenever the universal welfare of the population goes too high at the expense of the personal welfare of the individual, it is checked. Thus, near-zero personal welfares whittled away for enormous populations are impermissible; and, increasingly personally satisfied parents reducing the numbers of other persons are impermissible.

In other words, *Repugnance and Monstrosity are always impermissible*.

Which Indeterminacy View?

So, both Indeterminacy Views of the Dualism give better solutions to Repugnance than any version of the Standard View. However, this does not provide a clear determinant between the Indeterminacy Views. Both Indeterminacy Views have pros and cons. The Weakly Ultimate View is loose enough but risks being too loose, as it is permissive of unchecked self-interest and/or unchecked duty. The Defeasible Ultimate View is strict enough but risks being too strict, as it always requires self-interest and duty to be checked when conflicting. Notably, one might also endorse a number of views on a spectrum of permissibility in between the Weakly Ultimate and Defeasible Ultimate views. So, with this is mind, rather than litigating between these views here, we will simply sidebar the question by taking Phillips' two views to be the upper and lower bounds of permissibility on a set of reasonable views.

The Virtues of Indeterminate Dualism

These results solve two persistent problems of Practical Reason and seemingly justify both dualism and indeterminacy.

Persistent Problems Solved

These conclusions attempt to resolve two apparently persistent ethical problems: Sidgwick's Dualism and Parfit's Repugnance.

On the one hand, using the Dualism to resolve Repugnance, a problem intrinsic to utilitarianism, making utilitarianism by itself inadequate without egoism, seems to explain why the Dualism is a necessary feature (and not an unwieldy bug) of Practical Reason. On the other hand, resolving Repugnance using the Dualism seems to explain why Repugnance arises in the first place,

because utilitarianism by itself without egoism is an incomplete description of Practical Reason. It explains why Sidgwick, who worried dearly over the Dualism, did not have to concern himself much with Repugnance—self-interest would never let us get there. And, it explains why Parfit, who dismissed the Dualism handily, had to then contend with the specter of Repugnance—self-interest could not save him.

Furthermore, these two resolutions are made even better by their complementary relation, they fit each other, resolving each other, and explaining each other. Hitting two birds with one stone in this way, without appealing to or repealing any further side constraints, seems like the most parsimonious available solution to these particular problems, requiring no addition and leaving no remainder.

Dualism Justified

Although dualist views are often unsatisfactory because they give two answers to a single question, cases in welfare-population ethics seem to precisely require two answers because they are optimizing two variables: personal welfare and total welfare. Any welfare-population ethics that optimizes one variable of two misunderstands the problem as a single-variable optimization problem, not a multi-variable optimization problem, and thus will give answers that will seem prima facie extreme. Any intuitively satisfying answer will have to account for both variables. Firstly, the Dualism accounts for the value of the total welfare of additional persons by encompassing utilitarianism. Secondly, the Dualism accounts for the value of the average personal welfare of existing persons by encompassing egoism.

Indeterminacy Justified

Although on the one hand indeterminant views are often unsatisfactory because they fail to provide determinate answers to determinate questions, on the other hand it seems like indeterminacy provides the sets of indeterminate answers that are most intuitively appealing for indeterminate questions. Any welfare ethics that provides a determinate answer to seemingly indeterminate questions (e.g., have exactly two children and exactly seventy grand in income) will prima facie feel like an overly determinative prescription on an inherently indeterminate domain (which in the case of persons and their welfares is bound to vary). Any intuitively satisfying answer will only be as determinate as fits the domain that it purports to determine, not too determinate or too indeterminate. Firstly, the Phillips' Indeterminacy Views are determinate enough to reject cases of obligatory Repugnance. Second, Phillips' Indeterminacy Views are indeterminate enough to avoid obligating any obvious further problems (the Sadistic Conclusion or some such) (Arrhenius et al., 2022).

Conclusion

So, as we have attempted to show, Sidgwick's Dualism of Practical Reason, under Phillips' Indeterminacy Views, seems to offer plausible answers to questions of population ethics, specifically dispensing with the quandary of the Repugnant Conclusion (and the related Monstrous Conclusion). Depending upon which version of the Indeterminacy View one assumes, one either treats the Repugnant Conclusion as *never obligatory* or as *always impermissible*, which intuitively seems to be a solution (or set of solutions) to the problem, as well as the right kind of answer (or set of answers) to questions in population ethics more generally that require indeterminate two-variable considerations.

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