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# THE VALUE OF A PERSON

John Broome and Adam Morton

*I—John Broome*<sup>1</sup>

## I

**T***he basic intuition.* Many people have the intuition that adding a person to the world is not valuable in itself, even if the person would enjoy a good life. If a new person will make such demands on the world's resources that her existence will do harm to people already alive, that is a reason against creating her. On the other hand, if a couple want a child, that is a reason for them to have one. But there is no reason that arises from the person's own interest. If a person could be created, and would lead a good life if she was created, the fact that her life would be good is not a reason for creating her. The existence of a person is ethically neutral in itself. I shall call this 'the basic intuition'. It must be qualified. If a person's life would be bad, were she to be created, that is a reason against creating her; a person's existence is ethically neutral only if her life would be good. Jan Narveson says, 'We are... neutral about making happy people'.<sup>2</sup> That is the basic intuition.

For instance, suppose a couple are wondering whether to have a child. Suppose there is no doubt their child's life would be good if they had one. But suppose the couple decide their own lives will be better on balance if they remain childless, and because of that they do so. Few people would think they are acting wrongly. It is not that we think the couple have a reason to have a child—her life would be good—that can justifiably be outweighed by their own good. Instead, we think there is no positive reason at all why they should have a child. If having a child would be bad for the couple

1 I have had instructive conversations with very many people on the subject of this paper. Valuable comments from Richard Holton and Philip Pettit have had a direct impact on the paper.

2 Jan Narveson, 'Moral problems of population', *Monist*, 57 (1973), reprinted in Bayles, Michael D., (ed.), *Ethics and population*, Schenkman, 1976, pp. 59–80.

themselves, even to a small degree, that is a sufficient reason for them not to have one.

I am not going to defend the basic intuition, but I shall mention briefly two arguments that have been used to support it. Both can be found in Narveson's 'Utilitarianism and new generations'.<sup>3</sup> One is this. One state of affairs is surely better than another only if it is better for someone. But a state of affairs in which someone exists is not better for that person than one where she does not exist. So creating a person does not in itself bring about a better state of affairs. The second argument is this. Whatever moral duties we have, they are surely duties owed to people as individuals. But we cannot owe a person a duty to bring her into existence, because failing in such a duty would not be failing anyone. So bringing a person into existence cannot be, in itself, a moral duty.

I expressed the basic intuition by saying that a person's existence is ethically neutral. But this is unclear and imprecise, and it turns out to be very hard to express the intuition in a precise and coherent form. This paper explores some of the difficulties, and some possible ways around them. The basic intuition may be ultimately incoherent. But since it is common and attractive, it is worth the effort of trying to put it into coherent form.

## II

*The constituency principle and counterexamples.* Suppose a change leads to the existence of a new person, and also benefits or harms existing people. If the person's existence is neutral, the value of this change must be given by its value to the existing people; the fact that a person is created should not count either way. So it is natural to try and express the basic intuition by:

*The constituency principle.* Suppose two states of affairs have the same population of people, except that an extra person exists in one who does not exist in the other. Suppose the extra person has a good life in the state in which she exists. Then one state is at least as good as the other if and only if it is at least as good for the people who exist in both.

3 Jan Narveson, 'Utilitarianism and new generations', *Mind*, 76 (1967), pp. 62–72.

The constituency principle tries to capture the basic intuition in terms of the goodness of states of affairs, or more precisely in terms of betterness between states of affairs. For the sake of economy, I have stated the principle in terms of the ‘weak’ betterness relation ‘at least as good as’. As stated, the principle implies parallel principles for the ‘strict’ betterness relation ‘better than’, and for the relation ‘equally as good as’. That is to say: one state is better than the other if and only if it is better for the people who exist in both; and one state is equally as good as the other if and only if it is equally as good for the people who exist in both. The people who exist in both states form a constituency that determines the relative goodness of the states.

By the ‘population’ of a state of affairs, I mean all the people who live at any time. A state of affairs is a complete history for the world, and the constituency principle compares the value of different possible histories.

Unfortunately, this principle is false. The following example shows why. Consider these three alternative states of affairs:

- Example 1.*      1A:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, \Omega)$   
                       1B:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, 1)$   
                       1C:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, 2)$

In this example and others, I use the following notation. Each possible state of affairs is represented by a vector that shows its distribution of wellbeing. Each place in the vector stands for a person who lives at some time in at least one of the states we are comparing. The corresponding place in the different vectors stands for the same person. If a person exists in one of the states, I assume it is determinate whether or not she (or her counterpart) exists in each of the other states. In a state where she does not exist, her place in the vector contains an  $\Omega$ . In a state where she does exist, her place contains a number that indicates her lifetime wellbeing. I assume wellbeing can be measured on a cardinal scale that is comparable between people. I take the scale to be such that a life with a positive level of wellbeing is good rather than bad. In all my examples, there are many people whose wellbeing is the same in all the options. I shall not bother to specify what these people’s wellbeing is. In Example 1, they are the first  $n$  people.

The problem represented in Example 1 is whether or not to add person  $(n+1)$  to the population, and if she is added, whether or not to make her wellbeing 1 or 2. Think of it as the question facing a couple wondering whether or not to have a child, and what arrangements to make for her wellbeing if they do. In the example, the couple themselves will be affected neither for better nor worse by their decision. They are among the first  $n$  people.

According to the constituency condition,  $1A$  is equally as good as  $1B$ , since it is equally as good for all the first  $n$  people, who exist in both. Likewise,  $1C$  is equally as good as  $1A$ . In the comparison between  $1B$  and  $1C$ , the constituency includes the extra person  $(n+1)$ , and  $1C$  is better for that person. So the constituency principle says  $1C$  is better than  $1B$ . The principle implies, then, that  $1C$  is equally as good as  $1A$ ,  $1A$  is equally as good as  $1C$ , but  $1C$  is better than  $1B$ . This is a contradiction. As a matter of logic, the relation 'equally as good as' is transitive, and the constituency principle implies it is not. Therefore the constituency principle is false.

Two more examples will be useful.

- Example 2.*       $2A: (w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, 5, \Omega)$   
                       $2B: (w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, 6, 1)$   
                       $2C: (w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, 4, 4)$

Think of this as a problem facing parents who already have one child  $(n+1)$  and are wondering whether to have a second  $(n+2)$ . If they do, they can divide their resources between the children either equally or unequally. This example is a version of Derek Parfit's 'mere addition paradox'.<sup>4</sup>

The constituency principle implies  $2B$  is better than  $2A$ . In this comparison the constituency is the first  $(n+1)$  people.  $2B$  is better than  $2A$  for these people together, since it is equally as good for the first  $n$  and better for person  $(n+1)$ . For a similar reason, the constituency principle implies  $2A$  is better than  $2C$ . However, in the comparison between  $2B$  and  $2C$ , the constituency includes person  $(n+2)$  too. Which of the two is better for all these people? The constituency principle itself does not say, but it is very plausible to

4 Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford University Press, 1984, pp. 419–41.

assume it is 2C. 2C has more wellbeing in total, and it has it equally distributed between the two children. Given this plausible assumption, the constituency principle implies that 2C is better than 2B. So altogether this principle implies that 2B is better than 2A, 2C better than 2B, and 2A better than 2C. This is a contradiction. As a matter of logic, the strict betterness relation 'better than' is transitive. Granted the extra plausible assumption, the constituency principle implies it is not. So the constituency principle is false.

In Example 2, the constituency principle implies an intransitivity in strict betterness, which is a more serious contradiction than the one revealed by Example 1. On the other hand, the contradiction only arises because of the auxiliary assumption that 2C is better for the  $n+2$  people than 2B. In the next example, the constituency principle implies an intransitivity in strict betterness without any auxiliary assumption.

- Example 3.*
- 3A:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, 1, 3, \Omega)$
  - 3B:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, 2, \Omega, \Omega)$
  - 3C:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, 3, \Omega, 1)$
  - 3D:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, \Omega, \Omega, 2)$
  - 3E:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, \Omega, 1, 3)$
  - 3F:  $(w_1, w_2, \dots, w_n, \Omega, 2, \Omega)$

The constituency principle implies that 3B is better than 3A, 3C better than 3B, 3D better than 3C, and so on round to 3A better than 3F.

Notice that options 3A and 3C must be equally good. The only difference between them is the identity of the people who exist, and which of them has a wellbeing of 1 and which 3. This difference shows in the different orders of the elements in the vectors 3A and 3C. But there is nothing special about the order in which the people appear in the vectors. By putting them in a different order, I could represent the state of affairs 3C by the same vector as, with my present ordering of people, represents 3A. So 3A and 3C must be equally good. Yet in only two steps, the constituency principle implies 3C is better than 3A. This is enough to show the principle is false.

How should we respond to the conclusion that the constituency principle is false?<sup>5</sup> One possible response is to give up the constituency principle along with the basic intuition that led to it. This is the response of population theories that are sometimes called ‘impersonal’.<sup>6</sup> Since the basic intuition remains attractive, this response pays a penalty in abandoning it, and it has some other difficulties of its own.<sup>7</sup> Another is to express the intuition in a deontic form that does not involve betterness. For instance, in Example 2 we could understand it to say the parents ought to choose 2B if faced with a choice between 2A and 2B, and they ought to choose 2C if faced with a choice between 2B and 2C, and they ought to choose 2A if faced with a choice between 2C and 2A. There is no contradiction in this. There is still some explaining to do, however. Why should the parents make these choices, if they are not choosing the better option in each case? Indeed, what is the relative goodness of these options, and what stops the threatened intransitivity of betterness from arising? What should the parents do if faced with a choice amongst all three options, and why? Evidently, a theory is needed to develop this response.<sup>8</sup>

I am going to leave these two responses aside, and concentrate on others that try to preserve the intuition, and express it in terms of goodness. All of these responses adopt theories about the structure of the betterness relation that may be called ‘nonstandard’. The first claims that this relation may be intransitive, the second that it may be conditional in a particular sense, the third that it may be relative

- 5 This paper only adds to the large existing literature on the intransitivity that seems to be generated by the basic intuition. The seminal discussion is Derek Parfit’s, in *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 419–41. An important recent contribution is Peter Singer, ‘Possible preferences’, in Christoph Fehige, Georg Meggle and Ulla Wessels (eds), *Preferences*, de Gruyter, forthcoming.
- 6 One of the best worked-out theories of this type is in Charles Blackorby and David Donaldson, ‘Social criteria for evaluating population change’, *Journal of Public Economics*, 25 (1984), pp. 13–33, and Charles Blackorby, Walter Bossert and David Donaldson, ‘Intertemporal population ethics: a welfarist approach’, typescript, 1993. The term ‘impersonal’ is not a good one. None of these theories suggest there is a sort of good that does not belong to a person.
- 7 There is a critique of the work of Blackorby, Donaldson and Bossert in my ‘The welfare economics of population’, Discussion paper of the University of Bristol Department of Economics, 1993.
- 8 Many of Narveson’s arguments are expressed in terms of what we ought to do, rather than what is better. There is a persuasive argument on deontic lines in Paul Seabright’s ‘Creating persons’, *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* (1989), pp. 41–54.

to one's viewpoint, and the fourth that it may be vague. If the first of these claims is true, it invalidates the argument I have given against the constituency principle, which assumed transitivity. So this response can preserve the principle itself. The others give up the constituency principle, but give a different expression in terms of betterness to the basic intuition that underlies it. I shall discuss the first three in this paper; I leave the fourth to Adam Morton.

### III

*Intransitive betterness.* In 'Intransitivity and the mere addition paradox',<sup>9</sup> Larry Temkin uses examples like mine to argue, not that the constituency principle is false, but conversely that the betterness relation is intransitive.

Temkin argues that, when we compare the goodness of two options, particular criteria are relevant to the comparison, and different criteria may be relevant to different comparisons. Whether or not an option *A* is better than *B* depends on how *A* and *B* measure up against the criteria that are relevant to the comparison between *A* and *B*. When we compare the pair *B* and *C*, different criteria may be relevant, and different criteria again when we compare *C* and *A*. The result may turn out to be that *A* is better than *B*, *B* better than *C* and *C* better than *A*. Because different criteria are relevant to each comparison, nothing prevents this from happening. So the betterness relation may be intransitive.

Take Example 2, for instance. In the comparison between *2A* and *2B*, what is relevant according to the constituency principle is the wellbeing of the first  $n+1$  people. We can conclude *2B* is better than *2A*. For the same reason, *2A* is better than *2C*. But in the comparison between *2B* and *2C*, the constituency principle tells us the wellbeing of all the first  $n+2$  people is relevant. This different criterion makes *2C* better than *2B*. So we get an intransitive betterness relation, it seems.

But despite this point, I am going to insist the betterness relation is transitive. Why? Temkin mentions one theory that would give

<sup>9</sup> Larry S. Temkin, 'Intransitivity and the mere addition paradox', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 16 (1987), pp. 138–87.

grounds for insisting on it. He calls it 'the intrinsic aspect view'.<sup>10</sup> It says the goodness of a state of affairs is an intrinsic property of that state. If this is so, we can derive the conclusion that the betterness relation is transitive. If *A* is at least as good as *B* and *B* at least as good as *C*, then according to the intrinsic aspect view, *A*'s intrinsic goodness must be at least as great as *B*'s, and *B*'s at least as great as *C*'s. Consequently, *A*'s intrinsic goodness must be at least as great as *C*'s. So *A* must be at least as good as *C*.

Now, this derivation of the transitivity of betterness does not actually require the premise that goodness is an intrinsic property. If *A* is at least as good as *B* and *B* at least as good as *C*, then *A*'s goodness is at least as great as *B*'s, and *B*'s at least as great as *C*'s. Consequently, *A*'s goodness is at least as great as *C*'s. So *A* must be at least as good as *C*. The basis of this argument is simply that goodness is a property, and that betterness is the comparative of goodness. There is no need for goodness to be an intrinsic property. The comparative of *any* property is necessarily transitive.

Many relations are not transitive. 'To the left of' is not—think of people sitting round a table. But no intransitive relation can be the comparative of any property. There is no property of leftness, for instance. The relation 'judged by me to be at least as good as' may be intransitive, since it is not the comparative of any property. When I make judgements of betterness, different criteria may come to my mind as I make different comparisons, and the result may be intransitive judgements. My examples show how this can happen. But, because betterness is the comparative of the property of goodness, betterness must be transitive. Therefore, my judgements of betterness cannot possibly be correct unless they are transitive. So long as my judgements are intransitive, I still have work to do in sorting them out.

When I work on my intransitive judgements, the result may be that I come to change one of them, and so make them transitive. Or the judgements may refuse to change; it may seem to me that I have made the very best possible judgements, accurately taking into account all the proper ethical criteria, and yet these judgements may still be intransitive. If Temkin is right that different criteria may be

relevant to different comparisons, I cannot guarantee in advance that my judgements will turn out transitive. But if they do not, they cannot be judgements of betterness, whatever I may have intended. To express them accurately, I shall have to put them in other—perhaps deontic—terms.

In any case, even if betterness could be intransitive, Temkin's argument cannot be used to support the constituency principle. Example 3 shows why not. When the constituency principle compares 3A and 3B, the criterion it uses is the wellbeing of person ( $n+1$ ). When it compares 3B and 3C, the criterion it uses is the same: the wellbeing of ( $n+1$ ). Temkin suggests betterness might not be transitive because the criteria might be different in different comparisons, but in these two comparisons the criteria are the same. So Temkin has given us no reason to doubt transitivity in this case. Given transitivity, the constituency principle implies 3C is better than 3A. But I explained earlier that 3C and 3A must be equally good. So the constituency principle is false.

#### IV

*Conditional betterness.* Look again at Example 1. I think most people who share the basic intuition will know what to think about this example. Since no existing person would be affected for better or worse, the basic intuition says it does not matter whether or not the parents have a child. However, intuition also says that if they do have a child, they should make sure she is as well off as possible. Put generally, it does not matter morally whether we add a new person to the population (provided her life will be good), but if we do add one, we must do our best for her. This idea makes good sense, and in cases like Example 1 it provides a satisfactory guide to action. If a couple have a choice between 1A and 1B only, it says it does not matter which they choose. Likewise, it does not matter which they choose if they have a choice between 1A and 1C only. If they have a choice between 1B and 1C, they should choose 1C. If they have a choice between all three options, they should not choose 1B, but it does not matter whether they choose 1A or 1C.

So the intuition works as a guide to action in these cases, and on the face of it, it seems possible to express it in terms of goodness.

We may say that creating a person is equally as good as not creating her, but if she is created, it is better that her life should go well rather than less well. This formula uses an idea of conditional betterness: it is better that her life should go well, conditional on her existence. I shall develop this idea by applying it first in the different context of continuing an existing life rather than creating a new one.

In his paper 'The Makropulos case',<sup>11</sup> Bernard Williams considers what reason we have to continue our lives, if we have the choice, rather than to die. Most of us, he says, want all sorts of things and many of them are things we cannot get unless we continue to live. Death would prevent the satisfaction of these wants. That is a bad thing about death, and a reason to prefer living. Williams then considers this rejoinder: 'Many of the things I want, I want only on the assumption that I am going to be alive... It might be suggested that not just these special cases, but really all wants, were conditional on being alive.'<sup>12</sup> A want that is conditional on my being alive would give me no reason to avoid death. But Williams insists that many of us have wants that are *categorical*, by which he means they are not conditional on being alive. Categorical wants give us reasons for remaining alive.

What does it mean for a want to be conditional on being alive? If I want  $P$  conditional on  $Q$ , one thing that must mean is that I prefer  $Q \& P$  to  $Q \& \neg P$ , whereas I am indifferent between  $\neg Q \& P$  and  $\neg Q \& \neg P$ . Suppose I want the sea to be smooth next week conditional on my crossing the Channel next week. This means I prefer crossing a smooth sea to crossing a rough one, but if I am not going to cross, I do not care how rough the sea is. Notice that this conditional preference has implications for my preferences between crossing the Channel and not crossing it; it cannot leave me perfectly indifferent between the two. Because crossing a smooth sea comes higher in my preference ordering than crossing a rough sea, this implies the two cannot both stand level in the ordering with not crossing at all. If, say, I am indifferent between crossing a rough sea and not crossing at all, I must prefer crossing a smooth sea to not crossing at all. So, although my desire for a

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Williams, 'The Makropulos case: reflections on the tedium of immortality', in his *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge University Press, 1973, pp. 82–100.

<sup>12</sup> p. 85.

smooth sea is only conditional on my crossing, it implies I have a reason to cross in particular circumstances (if the sea will be smooth), or else not to cross in particular circumstances (if the sea will be rough). It may be puzzling how a want that only comes into play when a certain condition is satisfied can imply anything about my reasons for bringing about this condition itself. But the puzzle only arises from the habit of thinking that reasons are given by wants or preferences taken one by one. If instead, you think that reasons derive from the whole structure of a person's preference ordering, the puzzle will disappear.

But when Williams mentions wants that are conditional on being alive, he is evidently not thinking of conditional wants that work in quite the way I have just described. Suppose I want a warm autumn this year conditional on being alive during the autumn. This implies I prefer living through a warm autumn to living through a cold one, and I do not care what the autumn will be like if I am dead by then. That much carries over from what I said in the previous paragraph. However, Williams does not intend it to follow that I am not indifferent between living through the autumn and dying before then. For instance, he does not intend it to follow that, if I am indifferent between dying and living through a cold autumn, then I prefer living through a warm autumn to dying. If this followed, then conditional wants by themselves would be enough to ensure that most of us have a reason to continue living, and Williams would have no need to invoke categorical wants. Evidently, he intends wants that are conditional on living to leave me indifferent between dying and living in any circumstances. From now on, I shall restrict the term 'conditional want' to wants that are conditional in this stronger sense, so a want that is conditional on some condition leaves me indifferent about the condition itself. Intuitively, conditional wants like this seem to make sense. It seems we could make sense of a person who says she is perfectly indifferent about whether she lives or dies, but if she lives she wants to be in good health.

Williams assumes that all reasons derive from wants, so the only reasons one could have for remaining alive are to satisfy one's wants. But let me now generalize his idea to allow for the possibility that there are other good things in life apart from the satisfaction of wants. I shall introduce the more general idea of conditional

*goods*.<sup>13</sup> To say something is a good means it is better pro tanto that this thing should exist rather than not. To say something is a good conditional on *P*, means that, if *P*, it is better pro tanto that this thing should exist than not. I mean 'conditional' to have the strong sense I just described for wants. So a good that is conditional on my remaining alive does not contribute to making it better that I remain alive rather than die, whether or not I shall get the good if I remain alive. Only, if I do remain alive, it is better that I should get the good rather than not. A conditional good does not generate a reason why I should remain alive. If all my goods are conditional on remaining alive, there is no reason why I should remain alive.

Are there any goods that are conditional in this sense on remaining alive? It seems plausible there are. If satisfying a person's want is good, then satisfying a conditional want will be a conditional good. So if there are wants that are conditional on remaining alive there will be goods that are conditional on remaining alive. In any case, I find it independently plausible there are such goods: that some things, though good, do not generate a reason for living in order to get them. To take one example, the Epicureans believed *pleasure* is the only good, and that it is conditional on remaining alive. They believed it is good to have pleasure while you are alive, but it gives you no reason to remain alive. Since they believed the only sort of good there is is conditional on living, they believed death does no harm.<sup>14</sup> When Williams insists in 'The Makropulos case' that some wants are categorical, he is explicitly directing his argument against the Epicureans. He denies the Epicurean view that all goods are conditional, but he accepts that some are.

Are there really, as Williams thinks, any goods that are *not* conditional on remaining alive, so they give us a reason why we should remain alive? Plausibly, one sort of good that is not con-

13 I first suggested this idea in 'Some principles of population', in David Collard, David Pearce and David Ulph (eds), *Economics, Growth and Sustainable Environments*, Macmillan, 1988, pp. 85–96. It was adopted by Partha Dasgupta in 'Lives and well-being', *Social Choice and Welfare*, 5 (1988), pp. 103–26, reprinted as 'Population size and the quality of life', *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, 63 (1989), pp. 23–54.

14 See Epicurus, 'Letter to Menoeceus', in *Epicurus: The Extant Remains*, translated and edited by Cyril Bailey, Oxford University Press, 1926, pp. 83–93, particularly pp. 30–1. Williams comments particularly on the work of another Epicurean: Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, Penguin, 1951.

ditional in this way is furthering or completing a task we have embarked on: a career, perhaps, or bringing up children. I find it plausible that the good of finishing this paper is a reason for staying alive till I finish it, so this good does not seem conditional on my staying alive. On the other hand, the good of furthering or completing a task is perhaps conditional on living to start the task. I may have a reason for living to complete my next paper, which I have not started yet. But if I do have a reason, perhaps it is not to get the good of completing the paper. Perhaps it is to get the good of furthering my career, which I *have* started.

This is only barefaced speculation, but I am going to carry it a bit further. Suppose that furthering or completing a task is the only sort of good that is not conditional on continuing to live, and suppose that all goods of this sort are conditional on living to start the task. That is to say, suppose the reasons why we should move forward through life are always to further or complete the tasks we have embarked on; we are propelled by a sequence of overlapping tasks. As we go, we pick up other sorts of goods such as pleasure, but these are all conditional on living and do not themselves give us a reason for living. If this is so, it meshes with the basic intuition that motivates this paper, that the existence of a person is morally neutral.

What is the value of creating a person? It is not necessarily all the good her life will contain, but all the good that is not conditional on her existence. It is only this unconditional good that generates a reason why she should exist. My speculative suggestion is that, once a person is alive, the only goods that are not conditional on her remaining alive are completing or furthering tasks she has embarked on. Even these goods are conditional on her being alive up to the time of embarking on the task. So they are all conditional on the person's existing in the first place. If my suggestion is right, therefore, there is no value in creating a person. To accept this conclusion, you do not have to be convinced by my speculation that all the goods in a person's life are the specific sort I described. So long as you agree that all the goods in a person's life are conditional on the person's existence, that is enough.

This amounts to an argument in support of the basic intuition that a person's existence is morally neutral, but as an argument it is so speculative that I put no weight on it. Its importance for my purposes

is that it offers us the idea of conditional good as a resource for trying to shape the basic intuition into a coherent form. Conditional good is conditional in a stronger sense than my desire for a smooth sea is conditional. When it comes to evaluating the condition itself, conditional good is neutral. If a person's wellbeing is good conditional on the person's existence, her wellbeing makes no difference to the value of her existence. Therefore, even though a life with more wellbeing is conditionally better than a life with less, both may be equally as good as no life at all. This expresses the intuition that began this section.

However, though it is attractive and though it may express an intuition, I think we have to conclude that the idea of conditional good is incoherent. It implies a structure for the betterness relation that it cannot have. In Example 1, if we say  $1C$  is conditionally better than  $1B$ , and both are equally as good as  $1A$ , there is no disguising the fact that really we are simply saying  $1C$  is better than  $1B$ , and both are equally as good as  $1A$ . This is a contradiction. It might be tolerable in practice in cases like Example 1, because in those cases it only contradicts the transitivity of the relation 'equally as good as'. This makes betterness a 'quasi-transitive relation',<sup>15</sup> and it can lead to sensible recommendations about how to act; I laid them out for Example 1 at the beginning of this section. If the idea of conditional good always led to sensible recommendations, I would work on it some more, to try and find some way of giving it formal coherence. But in more complicated examples, it does not even do that. In Example 2, if we think a person's good is conditional of her existence, we shall think  $2B$  is better than  $2A$ ,  $2C$  better than  $2B$ , and  $2A$  better than  $2C$ . This will give us no sensible prescriptions for action. In this case, conditional betterness leads to intransitivity in the strict betterness relation, and that is intolerable. I think the idea has to be abandoned.

15 Amartya Sen, 'Quasi-transitivity, rational choice and collective decisions', *Review of Economic Studies*, 36 (1969), pp. 381–93, reprinted in his *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, Blackwell and MIT Press, 1982, pp. 118–34.

## V

*Relative betterness.* A relativist response to the failure of the constituency principle has been worked out by Partha Dasgupta.<sup>16</sup> Up to now, I have assumed there is a single betterness relation, but Dasgupta thinks there are many. He thinks betterness is relative to a population, so that each population has its own betterness relation. One option may be better than another from the point of view of one population and worse from the point of view of a different population. Specifically, Dasgupta suggests that the goodness of an option relative to a particular population is a weighted sum of people's wellbeing, giving more weight to the members of the population in question. For example, let us evaluate the options in Example 2 relative to the population consisting of the first  $(n+1)$  people. Since person  $(n+2)$  is not in this population, she gets a lower weight. If her weight is less than a quarter, 2A will be better than 2C from the point of view of the first  $(n+1)$  people. The four units that  $(n+2)$  gets in 2C is outweighed by the extra one unit that  $(n+1)$  gets in 2A compared with 2C.

How does relative betterness determine what ought to be done? If an existing population has to make a choice between a number of available options, what should it do? One might assume it ought to do what is best according to its own betterness relation, but that is not Dasgupta's view. Dasgupta recommends a two-stage procedure for deciding. Stage one goes like this. For each possible population, compare together all the options that contain just that population, and select the one that is best according to the betterness relation of that population. Since none of the options being compared contains any people outside this population, this means selecting the option that has the greatest unweighted total of wellbeing. For instance, in Example 2, we compare 2B and 2C because they share the same population, and select 2C because it has the greater total of wellbeing. We select 2A because no other

<sup>16</sup> I shall describe the most recent version of Dasgupta's theory, which appears in his *An Inquiry Into Well-Being and Destitution*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 377-94. An earlier version appeared in his 'Lives and well-being', op.cit. David Heyd supports a similar relativism in *Genethics: Moral Issues in the Creation of People*, University of California Press, 1992.

available option has the same population. By the end of stage one, we have selected one option for each possible population.

In stage two, the population that has to make the choice compares together all the options that have been selected at stage one. Dasgupta says it should choose the one that is best according to its own betterness relation. This means, in stage two, giving more weight to its own wellbeing. In Example 2, suppose the choice is in the hands of the first  $n+1$  people, including the parents and the first child. They compare 2A and 2C, which are the two options selected by stage one. If they ought to give other people's wellbeing less than a quarter the weight they give their own, they should choose 2A. If the weight is more than a quarter, they should choose 2C. In Example 1, suppose the choice is in the hands of the first  $n$  people. They compare 1A and 1C, which are the two options selected at stage one. They should choose 1C if the weight they should give other people is more than zero. If the weight is zero, 1A and 1C have the same weighted total, so it does not matter which they choose.

How do these conclusions about the examples square with intuition? Dasgupta does not discuss cases like Example 3, where more than one option has the same number of people, but the identities of those people are different, so I shall leave those cases aside. In Example 1, I suggested most people's intuitions are clear: it would be wrong to choose 1B if 1C is available, but the choice between 1A and 1C does not matter ethically. Dasgupta's theory reproduces this conclusion if and only if a population should give a zero weight to people who do not belong to it. In any case, it is obvious that Dasgupta's theory can only hope to capture the basic intuition that a person's existence is neutral if it makes this weight zero. Given that, in Example 2 the theory favours option 2A. I think many people's intuitions might not be clear in this example. Still, 2A is a plausible choice. So Dasgupta's theory may not only represent our intuitions adequately; in some cases it may take us beyond them, as an ethical theory should, and deliver an answer where intuition fails.

So Dasgupta offers us a coherent theory that could perhaps capture the basic intuition, at least in these cases. However, the theory needs to be justified. We need a justification for the idea of

relative betterness, and for the two-stage procedure. I shall consider each in turn.

Why does Dasgupta think betterness is relative to the population, and why does he think betterness relative to a population gives more weight to the population's own wellbeing than to other people's? The answer is that he treats population-relativity as a type of community-relativity. He thinks members of a community have special claims on each other that outsiders do not have. A population forms a community, and from its point of view people not yet born are outsiders. Dasgupta particularly has in mind the community of the family. 'Family members', he says, 'have a special claim upon one another. Potential persons don't have this claim. "They" are not members of the community.'<sup>17</sup>

So Dasgupta treats a person whose existence is in question as an outsider, and gives less weight to her interests on that account. In Example 2, for instance, he would take it to be in the interests of the second child ( $n+2$ ) to have  $2C$  come about, where she is created, rather than  $2A$ , where she is not. But he would say her interest may be outweighed by the more heavily weighted interest of the first child ( $n+1$ ). I said Dasgupta's theory can only reproduce the conclusions of our basic intuition by giving a zero weight to outsiders. But it is most implausible that any community could be justified in giving a zero weight to outsiders. It might be justified in giving outsiders a lower weight than it gives its own members, but not in ignoring their interests entirely. So the theory can only get the appropriate answer by taking up an implausible extreme position.

The reason it is in this bind is that it thoroughly misrepresents our basic intuition from the start. Our intuition is that a child has no interest in being created, not that she has an interest that may be outweighed or ignored. It is not in a person's interest to be created, because being created does not make a person better off than she would otherwise have been. This intuition is not relativist; anyone can recognize it, including the person herself if she is created. Indeed, it is a classic mistake to treat a person who might or might not be created as an outsider who has an interest in being created,

<sup>17</sup> *Enquiry into Well-Being and Destitution*, p. 386.

as though she is a person-in-waiting, who might or might not be granted the privilege of existence. I conclude that if we are to have a relativist theory of population, it cannot be founded on community-relativity.

Now to the justification of Dasgupta's two-stage procedure. Let us now accept that each population has its own relative betterness relation. How should an existing population act? According to the theory, it ought not simply to do the best it can according to its own betterness relation. Through the two-stage procedure, betterness relative to other populations helps to determine what a particular population ought to do. Why? Each population is constrained by the acts of its successors. If it chooses to bring a particular successor population into existence, what happens after that will be determined by the successor. The acts of the successor population will no doubt partly depend on its own relative betterness. So the betterness relation of one population will help determine the constraints faced by its predecessors. This is one way betterness of one population could affect what another ought to do. Is this what Dasgupta has in mind?

It may be, but I think not entirely, for two reasons. First, one population constrains another by what it will do or would do if it existed, but Dasgupta gives us no account of what a population will or would do. He only considers what a population ought to do, and it would be naive to assume that every population will do what it ought.

The second reason is brought out by Example 2. If the parents decide to have a second child, the result will be either  $2B$  or  $2C$ . The parents might well be able to determine the choice between these options before the second child is even conceived. Dasgupta assumes they could not determine this choice, but at one point he does raise the question of which they should choose if they could.<sup>18</sup> He does not answer explicitly, but he gives the impression he likes the answer ' $2C$ '. This is certainly a plausible answer. In the example, if the final result of the decision-making process was either  $2B$  or  $2C$ , the population in existence would be the later expanded population that includes the second child. Surely, therefore, the right

18 'Lives and well-being', p. 120.

choice between  $2B$  and  $2C$  is determined by what is better from the point of view of the expanded population. If the parents were able to choose between  $2B$  and  $2C$  before the second child was conceived, then plausibly they ought to choose  $2C$ . I think Dasgupta would agree. Yet, according to the relative betterness relation of the population existing before the second child is conceived,  $2B$  is better than  $2C$ . So what the predecessor population ought to do here seems to be determined directly by the successor population's betterness relation, and not by its own. It is not simply that the successor's acts constrain the predecessor's options. The successor's betterness has direct moral force over the predecessor.

This is puzzling. If the predecessor population ought to choose  $2C$  rather than  $2B$ , were it to have the choice, what does it mean to say  $2B$  is better than  $2C$  relative to this population? To be sure,  $2B$  is more in this population's interest than  $2C$ , but its own interest is not in question. Dasgupta's relative betterness relations are not meant to express the interests of particular populations; they are meant to express moral betterness from each population's point of view. Yet we have just seen they do not tell us what a population ought morally to do. So I do not know what Dasgupta's idea of relative betterness really amounts to. It would make good sense if each population ought to do the best it can relative to its own betterness. But the two stage procedure implies that is not so.

In summary, Dasgupta's relativist theory is a worthwhile attempt to capture the basic intuition. But I have two different doubts about its foundations. So I am still not convinced that the basic intuition can be coherently expressed in terms of goodness.

# THE VALUE OF A PERSON

John Broome and Adam Morton

## *II—Adam Morton*

### TWO PLACES GOOD FOUR PLACES BETTER

#### I

**F***our-good.* There is no formal problem involved in treating the creation of people as morally indifferent. One can perfectly consistently say that neither of two states of affairs, in one of which a person comes to exist and have an excellent life and in the other of which she does not come to exist, is better than the other. And one can consistently add that if she does come to exist it is better that she have an excellent life than a rotten one. There is no formal problem, that is, as long as one accepts that some states of affairs are incomparable in value to others. But that is surely true.

Let me set up some vocabulary. Some things are good, but that usually in context means that they are better than some natural standard or threshold. Human lives can be unimaginably awful and also fairly wonderful. There may be a natural zero-point in-between above which we could count them as good lives. *Good* is a 1-place predicate. *Better* is a 2-place predicate. There is also a 4-place relation, 1 is better than 2 by more than 3 is better than 4. Call this *4-better*. (And sometimes call simple *better* *2-better* for the sake of clarity. Similarly for other predicates.) Often a 4-place comparative has a robustness that a 2-place one does not, needing less support from linguistic context. For example it can be true that some shade of purple-red is redder than another by more than some shade of orange-red is redder than another, though to say which of these shades was redder than another, let alone which was red, some borderlines would have to be arbitrarily drawn. Similarly, someone could think that a situation in which one million people die peacefully is better than one in which two million different people die horribly by more than a situation in which ten people die peacefully

is better than one in which twelve people die peacefully. And they could think this without having to think that the first of these situations is definitely better than the second. For, first, given that each life is priceless the loss of two million may be no worse than that of one million, or even of one. And second, there may be no objective trade-off between death and suffering. One can be undecided on either of these and decided on the 4-comparison.

Sometimes, in fact, 4-comparison makes sense when 2-comparison does not. For example, suppose we are comparing infinite lists which I shall write in the form  $[{}_a e_1, {}_b e_2, {}_c e_3, \dots]$ . The subscripts before each element of the list indicate the place in the list that is being filled. So  $[{}_a 1, {}_b 2, {}_c 8, \dots]$  is different from  $[{}_c 1, {}_d 2, {}_e 8, \dots]$ . They could represent the valuable things in lives, or the consequences of actions. And we are evaluating them in some way that involves aggregating all the elements of the lists, for example just by adding them up. Now consider comparisons between the following lists.

$$\alpha_1 = [{}_a 1, {}_b 1, {}_c 1, {}_d 1, {}_e 1, \dots]$$

$$\alpha_2 = [{}_a 2, {}_b 2, {}_c 2, {}_d 2, {}_e 2, \dots]$$

$$\alpha_3 = [{}_a 1, {}_b 0, {}_c 2, {}_d 0, {}_e 3, \dots]$$

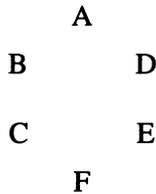
$$\alpha_4 = [{}_a 2, {}_b 0, {}_c 3, {}_d 0, {}_e 4, \dots]$$

None of these have finite sums. So you cannot compare them just by adding up and then comparing. But you can compare  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_2$ , in that each element of  $\alpha_2$  is greater than the corresponding element of  $\alpha_1$ . 2-comparison works where 1-valuation cannot apply. A similar 2-comparison of  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_3$  will not work. But a 4-comparison of  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_2$  with  $\alpha_1$  and  $\alpha_3$  does work.  $\alpha_4$  outranks  $\alpha_1$  by more than  $\alpha_3$  does.

Many 2-comparisons fail because the sums are infinite. For example, the expected value of actions on a simple utilitarian calculation will often be infinite. (That is the real reason why economists always stick in a discount rate.) This will not prevent some 2-comparisons being intelligible. (And in deciding what action to perform from a list of options one does not need to know the actual utilities, but just which one is greatest.) But very often these comparisons will also be meaningless, if one is really considering all consequences for all time for all sentient beings. Then,

often, a 4-comparison will be intelligible. But infinity is just one example here; the general point is just that 4-comparison often works when 2-comparison does not.

Incomparability comes in as follows. First suppose that there is a relation of 2-betterness between situations. Suppose that six situations fall into the following pattern



That is, A is better than B is better than C is better than F; A is better than D is better than E is better than F; but neither of B and C is ranked with respect to either of D and E. (B is not equal in value to either of D or E, or intermediate in value, but incomparable to them. See Herzburger [1973], Sen [1982], Morton [1991] Ch 3.)

On these same six situations one could also have a relation of 4-betterness. For example, we might (first stipulation) take all the pairs where just now the first was 2-better than the second, and for any such pair X and Y and any other pair Z and W which were not so ranked we might stipulate that X is 4-better than Y by more than Z is better than W. Then we might make a second stipulation that B is 4-better than D by more than C is 4-better than E. Then *if* we take C to be 2-better than E, B will be 2-better than E.

The point is that if we take 4-betterness as basic, and define 2-betterness in terms of it, then what is 2-better than what depends on a threshold. We might take the relation between C and E to constitute the threshold and also specify that B is better than D by more than C is greater than E, and that, say, C is greater than D by more than C is greater than E. Then the resulting 2-ordering will be linear  $A > B > C > D > E > F$ . But we might also take the threshold to be given by whichever is least among the pairs in the first stipulation above. Then the resulting 2-ordering will be the partial ordering above, in which some situations are 2-incomparable to others.

There is a helpful geometrical model here. Think of the elements to be 4-ordered as spread out in a 2 dimensional array with a fixed vertical direction. Think of pairs X, Y such that X is directly above

Y as related in such a way that on any 2-ordering consistent with the 4-ordering X will be better than Y. (For example, the constraint might be that X is better than Y by more than Y is better than X. See Morton [forthcoming] for details on relations between 2-orderings and 4-orderings.) Then X is better than Y by more than Z is better than W when the slope from X to Y is more vertical than that from Z to W. (To do this you don't have to think of any line as being absolutely horizontal. ) So taking the pair Z, W as a threshold for 2-comparison amounts to taking lines parallel to (Z,W) as horizontal and then taking  $X > Y$  when X is higher up than Y.

(An analogy. It is like the world of special relativity. There is a definite temporal axis, but to define a simultaneity slice 'horizontal' to it one needs to choose a frame of reference.)

This is as much preparation as is necessary. Probably as much as is bearable. Let's go on to John Broome's population problems.

## II

*Different-population cases.* The intuition is that adding a person to the world is not valuable in itself. (Or it might be something different, that one is not obliged to add a person, however valuable it might be to do so. That deserves attention, but I shall ignore it.) There is an easy translation into my terms: given a state of affairs in which two people have the power to create another person, the possible continuations in which such another person does and does not come to exist are incomparable in value. Neither is better than the other.

Apply this to Broome's examples one and two. It entails that in example one 1A is incomparable in value to both 1B and 1C. Presumably, if we tell the story right, we may take 1B to be better than 1C. and there is no contradiction here. So we see that a very weak version of the constituency principle is consistent:

*Feeble 2-constituency:* if two states have exactly the same people then one is at least as good as the other iff it is at least as good for the people who exist in both, and if two states differ in population then they are incomparable in value.

Similarly, in example two we may take 2A to be incomparable to 2B and 2C and 2C to be better than 2B. And in example 3 we may take all the states to be incomparable to each other, since no

two of them have the same population. And in this way the basic intuition is satisfied, together with the principle that the value of two situations involving exactly the same people is proportional to the value of the lives of those people.

So what is the problem? One worry is that one might want to make more comparisons than these structures allow. For example, suppose that someone is deciding whether to create a child and knows that the child would have an awful life. Or suppose that we are trying to weigh various combinations of world population and world welfare. Then we will want to make comparisons between situations involving different people. Complete incomparability seems a cop-out.

The problem is that it is hard to add some more comparability without producing problems. Remembering how to get more comparability from a partial ordering of 2-betterness—move to an underlying 4-betterness relation and add some thresholds—we might try first making some version of the constituency principle hold at the level of 4-betterness. For example

*Weak 4-constituency:* Given four situations the first is better than the second by more than the third is better than the fourth iff the difference in the well-being of the people common to the first two is greater than the difference in the well-being of the people common to the second two.

This is a weak-looking principle. But there are examples much like Broome's example three which show that it leads to an intransitive 4-betterness relation. I therefore conclude, with Broome, that the idea of constituency is hopeless.

Here is a better idea, based on the geometrical way of thinking of 4-betterness. Think of possible situations as arranged in space with situations containing exactly the same people vertically above one another, higher or lower according to the aggregated good for those people. [For simplicity I shall consider them aggregated just by adding up in utilitarian fashion, but there are many other ways.] They are also arranged horizontally. This too could be done in many ways. We might consider how varied the lives lived in that situation are. I shall consider a very simple form of this, simply the *number* of lives lived in a world. So we have a grid of worlds arrayed vertically by summed-up good and horizontally by population.

Imagine the leftmost worlds to have just one person, and the population to increase steadily as you go right. So a world is located by a pair  $(g,n)$  of its good and its population, and we have a relation of 4-betterness between co-ordinates  $(g,n)$ . This relation guarantees that  $(g,n)$  is 2-better than  $(g',n')$  if  $n=n'$  and  $g > g'$  (because, say,  $(g,n)$  is 4-better than  $(g',n')$  by more than  $(g',n')$  is better than  $(g,n)$ ). But for other pairs of co-ordinates we only get a 2-ordering if we choose a pair to serve as a threshold for 2-good. If we choose the pair  $(g,n)$  and  $(g',n')$  as a threshold then any other pairs  $(k,m)$  and  $(k',m')$  will be 2-ordered if the 'slope' between  $(k,m)$  and  $(k',m')$  is at least as vertical as that between  $(g,n)$  and  $(g',n')$ . (If you want to take numerical values for  $g$  and  $n$  literally, then this can be just a simple linear function.)

Now given any pair of worlds with different populations we can just stipulate that one is better than the other. That is, we can use that pair as a borderline for 2-betterness: a world will then be counted as 2-better than another when it is related to it as the first of these two borderline worlds is to the second. For example, we might take past changes in the world's population and standard of living, e.g. between 500 BC and 1900, which seem to us to represent net improvements, and then we might judge any change from the present state of affairs a net improvement if it was at least 'parallel' to that threshold change. (Many changes will remain incomparable.)

The 'horizontal' arrangement of worlds is what allows thresholds to define 2-valuations. It, and the geometrical analogy, may smack of the inappropriately numerical. But for many purposes what is needed is a vaguer consequence of the model, the idea that the range of possible comparisons between worlds similar in population or quality of life is less than that between worlds dissimilar in these respects. A very similar world might be seen as somewhat better or worse than ours by suitable choice of thresholds, but a very dissimilar world might be seen as much better or worse. I will appeal to this principle below, so let me name it.

*Continuity* If two worlds  $w, v$  are more dissimilar in population or quality of life than two worlds  $t, u$ , then either  $w$  is better than  $v$  by more than both  $t$  is better than  $u$  and  $u$  is better than  $t$ , or  $v$  is better than  $w$  by more than both  $t$  is better than  $u$  and  $u$  is better than  $t$ .

Note how talking in terms of 4-better allows continuity to be expressed in a way that is consistent with the incomparability of worlds with different populations. Note also how the continuity principle reduces the moral risk of both procreation and non-procreation: it rules out thresholds which define 2-better in such a way that either making or abstaining from making one more person of an average quality of life will result in a world very different in value.

The important point about all this is that this imposes a stratification on our valuing. There are the underlying 4-values, which respect the basic intuition: changes in population are always morally optional, in that the resulting states of affairs are incomparable in value. Then by choosing a threshold for 2-value we can superimpose on this an ordering of states with less incomparability. But these second-level valuations are not compulsory. There are many places we can set the thresholds.

One might describe this as the view that value is vague. I think this is how Broome would describe the view. But it is misleading in some ways. The underlying 4-values are perfectly definite, and given a threshold 2-values are definite. In both cases it is often definite that the comparative values of some states of affairs are incomparable. Rather than vagueness it is a combination of incomparability and contextuality. Of course these underlying definite 4-values are a wild abstraction from the real factors making some situations better or worse than others. Perhaps when you look closely at them you see that value really is vague. But that's another matter.

### III

*Two asymmetries.* Note how this way of thinking explains an obvious asymmetry between creating and destroying life. One might think that if procreating is morally neutral then so should killing be. For if from the point of view of a world with  $n$  people a world with  $n+1$  is incomparable in value, so from the point of view of a world with  $n+1$  people should a world with  $n$  people be. But that misses a vital point, which is best brought out with the infinite lists I used above.

$$\beta_1 = [{}_b v_{2,c} v_{3,d} v_{4,\dots}]$$

$$\beta_2 = [{}_a v_{1,b} v_{2,c} v_{3,d} v_{4,\dots}]$$

Suppose these represent states of the world, with a place for each person and the value in the place representing their well-being. The transition from  $\beta_1$  to  $\beta_2$  represents something that actually happens. A new person has come into the world, represented by a list with an additional place. On the other hand the transition from  $\beta_2$  to  $\beta_1$  describes someone ceasing to exist, represented by a transition to a list with one fewer places. But that never actually happens! (Though Stalinesque rubbing-out is an attempt at it.) When someone dies it does not come about that they do not exist. Rather, they exist but their life is shorter than it might have been. So assuming that in shortening someone's life we are making it less good (obviously not always true) the true representation of what we do in causing a death is to prevent the world changing from, say,  $\beta_1$  to some  $\beta_3$  as it would have been had the person not died, where  $\beta_3 = [v_1, v'_2, v_3, v_4, \dots]$  and  $v'_2 > v_2$ . (It would be mad to claim that deprivation of the goods of one's remaining life is all that is wrong in killing. There are violations of implicit contract, violations of a right of consent, and others. But even in terms of deprivation of good the asymmetry between creating and killing remains.)

So the crucial difference is that in creating someone one is creating an identity. There is no one whom one is making exist; rather one is making it be the case that someone exists. On the other hand in killing someone one is killing a particular person: there is someone whom one is making cease to exist-any-longer. It is not necessary that one intend or even believe that any particular person will die. A government minister whose actions cause old people to die of hypothermia has caused the deaths of particular people. On the other hand, a minister whose actions cause it to be the case that fewer people are conceived in the future has not caused any particular person not to exist.

(You may have worries here, along the lines of Joel Feinberg's case of the person who sets a bomb which will explode seven years later in a class of five-year-olds. Morally very un-neutral, and causing the deaths of people who did not exist when the act was performed. But even this action causes the deaths of particular people in this sense: the world will contain particular people independently of one's actions, and they will have shorter lives. So there will be people whose lives are shortened. See Feinberg [1988], and for a line opposite to the one I am taking here Shiffrin [1993].)

The neutrality of creation creates another interesting asymmetry. Intuitively it seems that although it is morally neutral to create a person with a good life, however good, it is not morally neutral to create a person with a bad life, if it would be sufficiently bad. This might motivate the following principle

*Non-inflicting principle* If a level of well-being is such that death would be better than a life at that level then creating a person whose life would be no better than this would represent a net decrease in value.

How can this be, if worlds with different populations are incomparable in value? Two ways.

First, 'death would be better than a life at that level' could be taken to mean 'for anyone, in any world with any population, death would be better.' Then, evidently, the non-inflicting principle is consistent with the general incomparability of worlds with different populations. It could be trivially true in that there was no level beneath which death was under all conditions better than life. Or it could be that there was such a universal floor on the bearability of life, which might be lower than the level at which dying is better than living for us here and now. This would constitute a constraint on the possible 'horizontal' of world-population pairs discussed in the last section.

Another possibility is that we might take 'death would be better than a life at that level' to mean 'in all worlds very near actuality.' In effect, within the variation countenanced by everyday practical counterfactuals creating a bad life is a bad thing. The implicit assumption here must be that worlds with very different populations are very far away. So if for example one could create someone in a way that caused there to be immensely more or fewer people in the world then the principle, so construed, would not apply. But, applying the continuity principle of the last section, if a world is not very different from ours then the quality of life that would diminish its overall value in that world will not be very different from the quality of life that would diminish overall value here.

The thing that seems to me most interesting about both interpretations of the non-inflicting principle is that they suggest that the level of well-being below which living is worse than dying may be relative to a population. I find this interesting and peculiarly plausible.

## IV

*Conditional good.* Borderlines for 2-value are arbitrary, so far. But that is looking at all possible situations. Very few of them are actual. So perhaps knowing where we are will reduce the valuational variety a bit. Some incomparabilities may be resolved conditional on some facts. Broome obviously finds the idea of conditional value attractive, but dismisses it in the end. His reasons are rather mysterious. He says that if one thinks that some things are valuable only conditional on one's existence then one will be led to intransitive valuations by examples like his example two. I don't see why this is so. One natural definition of conditional value would run

A is better than B conditional on C iff in the nearest worlds in which C is true A is better than B.

Suppose now that worlds with different numbers of people are incomparable in value, and that worlds involving the same people are better when the people in them have better lives. Suppose C is 'all and only the people who actually exist exist', A is 'I do well at no one's expense' and B is 'I do badly but no one gains by it'. Then A is better than B conditional on C, although the full range of situations that make A true includes some incomparable in value to situations making B true. Applying this to Broome's example two, and making some natural assumptions, we get that conditional on both person  $n+1$  and person  $n+2$  existing it is better that they have welfare 4 and 4 respectively than that they have 6 and 1. But we do *not* get that conditional on person  $n+1$  existing it is better that she have welfare 5 than 4. To think this latter is to build the constituency principle into conditional good. And conditional good need have nothing to do with constituency.

If this is right then one class of conditions, at any rate, on which good is more determinate are those which specify the whole population of the world. But when we talk in ways suggestive of conditional good we seem to suppose less. We say 'it is better that I accomplish my aims, given that I exist'. This may not be so very different. For the definition reads '...in the *nearest* worlds in which C is true...'. In the nearest worlds in which I exist nearly all the rest of us do too. (And, given continuity, the value of different qualities of our lives are not very different.)

(One thing that makes it hard to follow Broome here is that he talks exclusively of values attaching to particular situations. As ultimately they do. But conditionals most naturally relate propositions. So one has to add in some way of valuing propositions in terms of the values of the situations which could make them true.)

There is another way of setting thresholds for 2-value that is related to conditional good. Suppose that you have made choices in the past and now endorse them. You do not think they were wrong choices. Then you may want to use them as a standard for future choices. Suppose that two people have a child, thinking that the life the child could expect would be worth having. The child dies, and they consider having another. They may reason 'if it was worth doing once it is worth doing again'. Then they are using their past actions to set a threshold for value, in much the way I suggested we might take past population-and-welfare changes. Or, more deviously, someone might reason as follows. 'Given that I exist, my life is good. Given that my life is good, my parents did good in creating me. Given that they did, so would I in having a child.' Unfortunately, or more likely not, this reasoning is fallacious. It runs together two different kinds of conditional good, the first one I defined and the one we are now considering.

## V

*Incomparably large.* The basic intuition, that creating people is morally neutral, would not be an interesting one unless people's well-being were *not* morally neutral. People are valuable but creating them is not. The suggestion implicit in this paper is that the reason creating people is not good is that people are so very valuable. Worlds involving different people contain different infinitely valuable things. Comparing these is hard. Often the result is incomparability, and that is why procreation is neutral. That may be a fairly tidy conclusion, but the reasoning that leads to it is full of dubious assumptions and obvious simplifications. One thing this shows is how far we have still to go in understanding how to combine sensible comparisons of possible situations with a full appreciation of the value of life.

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