On the Buddhist Truths and the Paradoxes in Population Ethics

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Abstract

Most discussion in population ethics has concentrated how to order populations by the relations "is better than" and "is as good as". The topic is characterized by paradoxes which show that our considered beliefs are inconsistent in cases where the number of people and their welfare varies. The best known and most discussed example shattering our intuitions is Parfit's *Mere Addition Paradox*. But why are paradoxes prevalent in population ethics? Can the analysis of Buddhist intuitions contribute to answer this question?

- The comparison of classical utilitarian and Buddhist intuitions demonstrates the close tie between intuitions and interests. The perplexing Buddhist intuition about non-existence can be explained (except for metaphysical reasons) by a radically different priority given to survival.
- The method of measuring the quality of life is not decisive for the existence of paradoxes. The Buddhist axiology changes but doesn't remove counter-intuitive combinations.
- If the conflict of interest (quantity versus quality) is described within a two-parameter model, it causes conflicting intuitions. In axiologies which favour quantity (utilitarianism) or quality (perfectionism) the conflicting intuitions inevitably lead to paradoxes.
- In order to find a compromise, one would have to find a *universal* interest and a corresponding universal intuition. The obvious candidate to meet this request is *sympathy*. But since there is no universal consensus on the desirable *degree* of sympathy, the normative force of such an approach is limited.
- Breaking out of the two-parameter model and accepting the incommensurability of certain qualities threatens the normative claim of population ethics.

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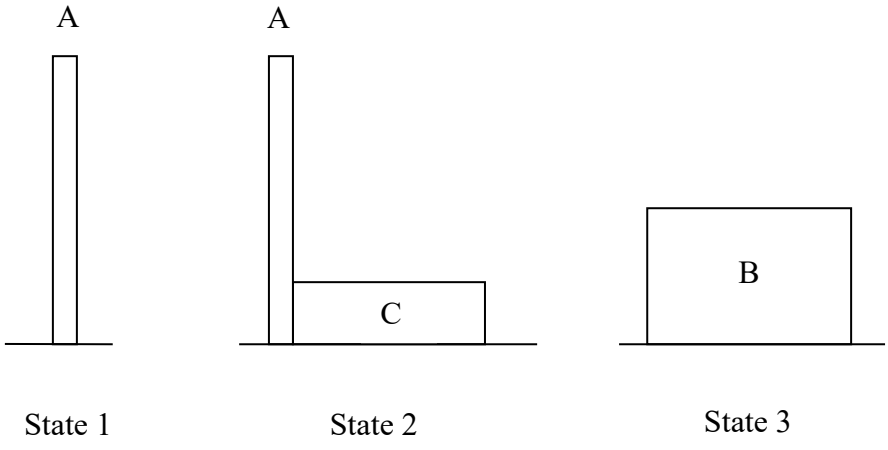
1. Introduction

Starting Point
Starting point of this paper is the following citation concerning the state of contemporary population ethics:
Most discussion in population ethics has concentrated on how to evaluate populations in regard to their goodness, that is, how to order populations by the relations "is better than" and "is as good as". This field has been riddled with paradoxes which purport to show that our considered beliefs are inconsistent in cases where the number of people and their welfare varies [Arrhenius 2004, 201].

Type of Problem
The best known and most discussed example shattering our intuitions is Parfit's Mere Addition Paradox. This paper explores the potential of the Buddhist Truths to answer the following questions:
- What is at the source of the Mere Addition Paradox?
- Why are paradoxes unavoidable in population ethics?

The Mere Addition Paradox
The Mere Addition Paradox was identified by Derek Parfit [Parfit 1984, Chapter 19]. In this paper the paradox is introduced in a two-step procedure. Each of the two steps seems to be intuitively right, but the consequence is a statement, which is intuitively wrong. The following diagram Fig.1 shows different populations, with population size represented by column width, and the population's happiness (in percent) represented by column height.

Fig.1
Mere Addition Paradox



For each population represented, everyone within the population has exactly the same level of happiness. Population A, in contrast to B and C, is 100% happy; all their preferences are satisfied. It is assumed that population A and C in state 2 live on different planets so that there is no exchange of information between A and C [Parfit 2004, 11].
In classical utilitarianism, the only criterion which is used to valuate populations is the accumulated happiness.

- Intuition 1:
  A+C is better than A, as long as all lives in C are worth living.
  The happiness of the additional people C is added to the one of A.

- Intuition 2:
  Let's assume that state 2 and 3 contain the same number of people. Then
  B is better than A+C, as long as the accumulated happiness in B is higher than in A+C.
  The critical assumption is that two populations are commensurable, although they contain different levels of happiness. We will refer to this assumption later in the paper.

If B is better than A+C, then it is also better than A.This however leads to the following Repugnant Conclusion:

"A population Z, consisting of 500 billion individuals, each with a life that is barely worth living, is better than a population A consisting of 1 billion individuals, each having lives that are of extremely high quality – as long as the sum of happiness (welfare) is greater in Z than in A".

2. Buddhism

The Truths

We take Buddhism as a starting point to find an answer to the *Repugnant Conclusion*. For this purpose the Buddhist "Truths" are translated into the language of contemporary preference-based ethics. There is no claim, that all dimensions of Buddhist ethics are preserved in this translation. The accentuation is on the psychological dimension and not on the metaphysical one. Some demand on freedom is made in finding ethical principles based on Buddhist insights. Following a short description of the Buddhist Truths:

- *First Noble Truth*: "Life is inseparably tied to suffering."

- *Second Noble Truth*: "The cause of suffering are attachments (desires) in a world where everything changes, nothing is permanent."

- *Third Noble Truth*: "Suffering can be terminated by ending human desire."

- *Forth Noble Truth*: "Human desire can be ended by following the Eightfold Path."

It is assumed, that the goodness or badness of the world solely depends on the preferences (interests, desires, attachments) it contains and on their frustration and satisfaction. The term *preference* is used in this general sense and is not restricted to a *preference of ordering* as in many essays on economics. On the level of the individual this means that "whatever makes life worth living" can be expressed in terms of preferences.
The Second Noble Truth links the term "suffering" to the terms "desire" and "attachment" which are occurrences of the term "preference":

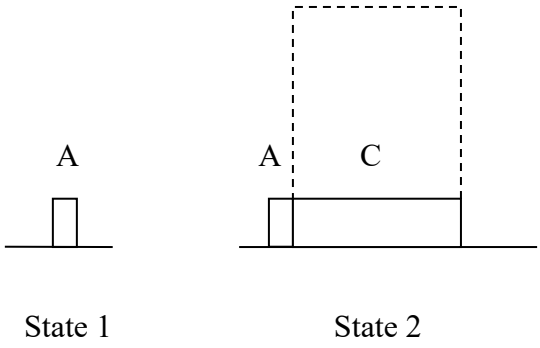
- *Second Noble Truth:* "Suffering is caused by preference-frustration".

The link between preferences and the hedonistic scale is not trivial. Most preference utilitarians understand their theory of welfare as an alternative to hedonism. Each preference-frustration has its own character and may be incommensurable with other frustrations. Classical utilitarians by contrast maintain that minor frustrations like "discomfort" can be added up to major ones like "suffering". The Mere Addition Paradox is based on the classical utilitarian point of view. In the context of the paradox the Third Noble Truth is of special importance. Translated into the language of preference utilitarianism it goes as follows:

- *Third Noble Truth:* "Preference-frustration can be terminated by terminating the creation of preferences".

According to this instruction the goal of Buddhist ethics is the "avoidance of preference-frustration by eliminating preferences". A similar prophylactic approach can be found with the Stoics, Epicurus, Schopenhauer, and - in the 20th century - with Narveson and Fehige. Following a picture to illustrate the difference between the classical utilitarian and the Buddhist point of view:

Fig.2
Modest and demanding population



Whereas Fig.1 shows the happiness *in percent*, Fig.2 shows it on an *absolute* scale.
In the A- and C-population only basic preferences like food and shelter are satisfied. The A-population (Buddhists) managed to eliminate additional preferences whereas the C-people didn't (indicated by the dotted line). From the Buddhist point of view the state of affairs worsens by adding the unaccomplished demands of the C-people. From the classical utilitarian point of view the state of affairs improves, because the lives of the C-people are worth living.

The Reverse Repugnant Conclusion

According to Buddhism the moral value of state 1 in Fig.2 cannot be increased by adding a C-population. But the more the quality of life of the added C-population approaches the theoretical maximum, the more this principle contradicts intuition. A+C is worse, even if the added C-population is almost perfectly happy [Parfit 1984, 415].

With an A-population equal zero above statement turns into the Reverse Repugnant Conclusion [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, chapter 2.4]:

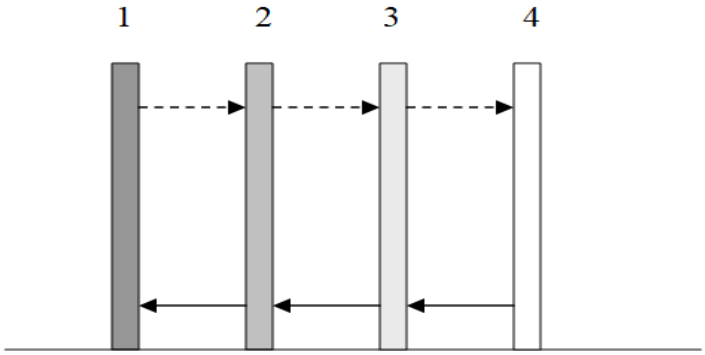
"A population with very high positive welfare is worse than an empty population. Since most lives with very high welfare can be assumed to have at least one frustrated preference, such lives are worse than non-existence."

How can Buddhism escape the Reverse Repugnant Conclusion? The key is a radically different intuition about non-existence:

Kinds of Happiness

In order to analyse the Buddhist intuition about non-existence, the Parfit diagram has to be enhanced slightly. The following diagram shows different states of a single individual. The rectangles in Fig.3 represent the degree of preference-satisfaction (in percent), a net value of satisfied and frustrated preferences as depicted by the Parfit diagram. The horizontal line marks the neutral level for existence [Broome, 140]. The shadowing indicates the attachment to biological preferences; a dark shadowing means a strong attachment. Happiness comes in different colors which correspond to different volatilities.

Fig.3
Buddhist Scale



From the Buddhist point of view perfect preference-satisfaction as shown in state 1 of Fig.3 is a temporary phenomenon. Since the *biological* root of human behaviour (replication of genes) is a maximizing function, it is simply impossible to get it satisfied. The attachment to life produces frequent changes between high and low preference-satisfaction. Buddhism tries to overrule the biological goal by a cultural one: the avoidance of suffering through the elimination of attachments. The Eightfold Path is a detailed instruction how to eliminate attachments (indicated by the dotted arrows in Fig.3). But life is designed as an addiction mechanism and forces the individual to get involved (indicated by the firm arrows in Fig.3). The uncoupling of attachments causes preference-frustrations, similarly to the deprivation from drugs. According to Buddhism this deprivation can be alleviated by the insight into transcience. The suffering from missed chances disappears with the devaluation of the chances. Biological happiness and suffering are like two different sides of a coin. The Eighfold Path teaches how to give away the coin without missing it.

The Preference for Non-Existence

The more a Buddhist succeeds in following the Eightfold Path and the weaker his attachment to biology becomes, the more he loses his Darwinian fitness. The light shadowing indicates a different (contemplative) kind of happiness, not originating in biological success. State 2 in Fig.3 might represent an average Buddhist and state 3 a Buddhist monk. State 4 finally corresponds to the Nirvana, i.e. to a state free of preference-frustrations and independence from biological (volatile) preferences. The Nirvana resembles non-existence insofar as the ego is dead. One can imagine the death of the ego as the beginning of an impersonal spiritual form of existence within a transcendent reality. If finally the decomposition of the material ego into this spiritual form of existence is seen as a goal, then it becomes clear that the Reverse Repugnant Conclusion is not counter-intuitive for a Buddhist. Buddhism strives for a painless accordance with the inevitable. Non-existence of the ego is the only paramount preference which can absolutely and permanently be satisfied.

Our intuition of perfect preference-satisfaction is characterized by the imagination of a *land of milk and honey*. According to Buddhism, this intuition is completely misleading. In the real world perfect preference-satisfaction can only be approached by eliminating preferences. The closeness of perfect preference-satisfaction (in the Buddhist sense) and non-existence is the key to escape the Reverse Repugnant Conclusion.

3. Intuition and Interest

Classical Utilitarianism versus Buddhism

Does the Buddhist axiology eliminate the Mere Addition Paradox? The Buddhist method of measuring quality says that an empty population is morally superior to non-empty ones. But an empty population is a trivial solution to the paradox and the question, which of two non-empty populations is preferable, remains unanswered. The Buddhist axiology changes the definition of "repugnancy", but doesn't solve the conflict between quality and quantity [Arrhenius 2000, 63].

There is however a gain in a different area of the investigation. The comparison of classical utilitarian and Buddhist intuitions teaches something about the nature of intuitions:

- A Buddhist doesn't associate the Nirvana (non-existence of the ego) with feelings of coldness, loss and the like but with a positive feeling of liberation. His prime *interest* is to besiege suffering.
- In contrast, the classical utilitarian (and biological) *interest to exist* leads to extremely unpleasant intuitions about non-existence.

Intuitions are closely tied to interests. Counter-intuitivity can be removed by changing the interest and vice-versa.

According to the first Noble Truth there is an unresovable conflict between the classical utilitarian interest to *expand life* and the Buddhist interest to *avoid suffering*. The interest to expand life stands for the *quantity* (size) of a population, the interest to avoid suffering stands for the *quality* of life.

Quantity versus Quality

If we analyse the intuitions of the Mere Addition Paradox Fig.1 with regard to the underlying interests we get the following picture:

- The interest to improve the *quality* of happiness (perfectionist axiology) leads to the intuition that *population A* is preferable to *population B.*
- The interest to increase the *quantity* of happiness (classical utilitarian axiology) leads to the intutition that *population B* is preferable to *population A.*

As long as the quality and quantity of the two populations don't deviate too much, both axiologies seem to be defensible.

But the more one of the two interests is devaluated at the cost of the other, the more the combination becomes counter-intuitive.

- According to the classical utilitarian axiology it is correct to decrease the quality of life in favour of a larger population (with a higher total amount of happiness). Nevertheless at some point this devaluation of quality becomes counter-intuitive (Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion)
- According to a perfectionist axiology it is correct to decrease the size of a population in favour of a higher quality of life. But when this devaluation of the size results in a zero population it becomes counter-intuitive for all non-Buddhists (Reverse Repugnant Conclusion).

Obviously at some point an intuitively plausible devaluation turns into a counter-intuitive one; an experience which is perceived as a paradox.

To raise the minimum quality just above a critical level [Blackorby] doesn't solve the problem as long as the utilitarian accumulation is retained [Arrhenius 2000, 72]. The conflict between quantity and quality continues in the negative territory of welfare. In this territory the total amount of *negative* welfare increases with the size of a population so that the role of quantity turns into its opposite [Rachels, 166].
For the purpose of this paper we can equalize the term *positive welfare* with the different qualities of happiness, *negative welfare* with the different qualities of suffering. So far the analysis assumed that all qualities are commensurable. But now we will take a closer look at this assumption.

What is the characteristic of above described paradoxes? It is the experience that we arrive at a counter-intuitive result *by applying an intuitively sound procedure*. But possibly the procedure isn't as sound as it seems to be. The intuition of its correctness is based on small steps. Within a small step the different qualities seem to be commensurable. But the accumulation of many small steps results in significantly different qualities whose commensurability can be contested.

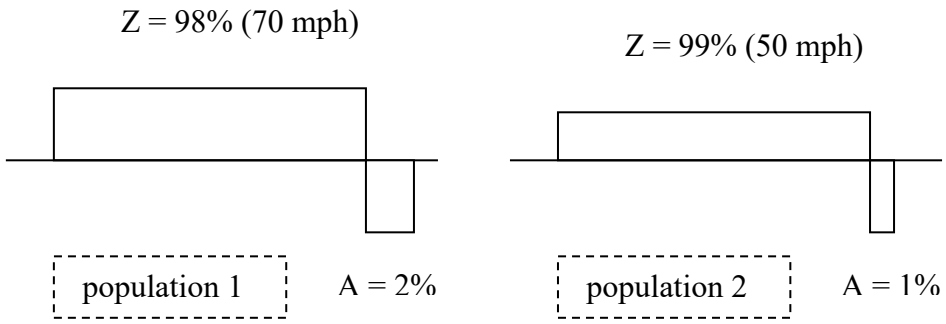
Commensurability

Perhaps the most important example of the conflict between quantity and quality includes *combinations* of suffering and happiness. In practice, most populations contain a happy majority and a suffering minority. Classical utilitarianism *compensates* the suffering of the minority with the happiness of the majority, a procedure which prerequisites

commensurability. This intuition, however, is not only challenged by Buddhism. It contradicts Popper's often cited statement that "one man's pain cannot be outweighed by another man's pleasure" [Popper, vol.I, 234-235]. It also conflicts with Parfit's claim about compensation [Parfit 1984, 337] and Wolf's misery principle [Wolf, 63]. These opposing intuitions represent the interests of the suffering minority. Following an example to illustrate the conflict:

If there were a national speed limit of 50 mph (in the USA), it is overwhelmingly likely that many lives would be saved each year, as compared with the current situation. One of the costs of the failure to impose such a speed limit is a significant number of deaths. The benefits of higher speed limits are increased convenience for many. Despite this, it is far from obvious that failure to impose a 50 mph speed limit is wrong. Most people seem to be ready to accept the claim that small benefits to a great enough number of people can outweigh great harms for a minority [Norcross, 159].

Fig.4
Reduction of the speed limit



In Fig.4 it is assumed, that the number of deaths (A) can be cut in half by a decrease in the speed limit by 20 mph. The percentage of the undamaged car drivers (Z) would accordingly be increased to 99%. Is *population 2* morally superior to *population 1*?

1. Utilitarians vote for *population 1* because *net* happiness in *population 1* exceeds the one in *population 2*.
2. From the Buddhist point of view it is repugnant to prefer *population 1*, because there is less suffering in *population 2*.

In order to find a compromise one would have to find a *universal* interest and a corresponding universal intuition. The obvious candidate to meet this request is *sympathy* [Lumer, 2]. But since there is no universal consensus on the desirable *degree* of sympathy, the normative force of such an approach is limited.

The utilitarian position seems to lack compassion. But the more the number of traffic victims (A) in *population 1* approaches the one in *population 2*, the more the preference for *population 1* looses its counter-intuitivity. Finally the considerably higher net happiness in *population 1* has to be weighed against the death of a single person.
If we go to the extreme and don't accept any more deaths, then we have to stop mobile traffic completely. At this point most people would reconsider the idea of commensurability.
If we maintain that a life without cars is no disaster then we have to go a step further and say that we don't participate in the struggle for survival and renounce to the benefits of industrialization. Slowly but inevitably we approach the moral position of a Buddhist monk.

The problem of the *tolerable suffering* points back to the basic conflict between classical utilitarianism and Buddhism.

There are countless examples in risk ethics which show, that the concerned activities would be chocked under a strictly risk-averse regulation. And in many cases it is impossible to draw the line between those activities which are required for survival and those which could be sacrificed.

The Impossibility Theorem

This paper is about the source of intuition and not about a specific theory. The countless normative approaches in population ethics have been investigated in great detail. The *impossibility theorem for welfarist axiologies* [Arrhenius 2000] postulates that paradoxes are unavoidable as long as all qualities (perfectly happy lives, lives barely worth living, tormented lives etc.) are considered to be *commensurable.* Commensurable qualities can be expressed in a single variable (welfare). According to Arrhenius the only way to avoid paradoxes is by questioning commensurability and breaking out of the two-parameter model:

1. If lives *barely worth living* are incommensurable with *perfect* lives, the *Repugnant Conclusion* disappears. But then populations with different sizes and qualities cannot be ordered any more according to an uncontested "is better than" relation.
2. If the Buddhist type of happiness is incommensurable with the biological type of happiness, the *Reverse Repugnant Conclusion* disappears. But then there is no unique way anymore to classify a population "better" or "worse" than an empty population.

Obviously the price for giving up commensurability is high. Without an uncontested "is better than" relation there is no uncontested population ethics.

„ ...the impossibility theorem cast doubts on the whole project of finding a normative theory that coheres with our considered moral beliefs." [Arrhenius 2000, 265].

4. Conclusion

- The comparison of classical utilitarian and Buddhist intuitions demonstrates the close tie between intuitions and interests. The perplexing Buddhist intuition about non-existence can be explained (except for metaphysical reasons) by a radically different priority given to survival.
- The method of measuring the quality of life is not decisive for the existence of paradoxes. The Buddhist axiology changes but doesn't remove counter-intuitive combinations.
- If the conflict of interest (quantity versus quality) is described within a two parameter model, it causes conflicting intuitions. In axiologies which favour quantity (utilitarianism) or quality (perfectionism) the conflicting intuitions inevitably lead to paradoxes.
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