

The Denial of the World from an Impartial View

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Abstract

The Buddhist *denial of the world* seems hard to defend if it is confronted with empirical data. Surveys on subjective life satisfaction consistently report that the majority is satisfied with their lives. Is the desire to escape from the cycle of rebirth a sign of risk-aversion or even irrationality? How would an impartial observer evaluate the world?

An impartial view is achieved by interpreting the surveys on life satisfaction as probability distributions for life's risks and chances. It turns out that there is no indisputable metric for measuring risks and no reliable forecast. Given this uncertainty the *denial of the world* cannot easily be dismissed as being irrational.

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Introduction

Starting point

“And remember, he who rebukes the world is rebuked by the world.” (Kipling, 116)

The above quote describes the mechanism which ensures that the affirmation of the world prevails. Optimists have a better survival value, and the survivors are always right. But are the survivors also the winners? Not from a Buddhist point of view which suggests that we should rather leave the wheel of reincarnation.

Type of Problem

- Is our perception of suffering and risk distorted?
- How would an impartial observer evaluate the world?

Method

- Two metaphors with the same structure (a happy majority and a suffering individual) but different messages are examined. The first suggests denying the world out of compassion; the second suggests limiting compassion and affirming the world.
- Using an impartial perspective, the issue of compassion is transformed into an issue of risk. After this transformation the *denial of the world* can be expressed in terms of *uncertainty-aversion*.

Metaphors in Ethics

Metaphors are a kind of language which helps to describe the world and find an orientation. Different cultures use different metaphors to describe the same phenomenon. *Life* is described as a journey, as an inquiry, as an examination, as a learning process or as a risky game. In this paper we look at contemporary metaphors which make the *valuation of life* and *the denial of the world* a subject of discussion. For this purpose we will adopt the following definition:

“How good or how bad is the world? That solely depends on how good or bad the individuals are in this world (...). And how good and how bad are the individuals? That solely depends on how well they feel and to what extent their wishes are fulfilled.” (Wessels, 11)

This definition does not cover all possible aspects for valuating the world (like yet unknown forms of existence in other parts of the universe) but it is a sound basis for valuations on this planet.

- Aspects of the world which are not relevant for sentient beings will be discarded.
- The term *individuals* includes all sentient beings. In this paper we restrict the investigation to humans.
- In the context of humans, the term *good* means *life satisfaction*. Life satisfaction has an affective component (*how well they feel*) and a cognitive component (*the fulfilment of their wishes*).
- For the purpose of this paper we can use the terms *life satisfaction*, *positive welfare* and *happiness* as synonyms.

Metaphors as well as scientific abstractions attempt to *reduce complexity without losing essential information*. Mathematical models – which require a distant way of thinking – express losses by finite numbers, and the application of *game* theory in ethics suggests that the gambler can easily withdraw from the situation. But seen from the inner perspective of an individual the major risks in life are emotionally loaded to such an extent that quantification doesn't make sense. In this paper we will attempt to connect the engaged, emotional point of view with the distant, indifferent perspective.

Metaphor 1: The City of Omelas

A negative valuation of the world is hard to defend, if it is confronted with empirical data. Surveys on subjective life satisfaction consistently report that the majority is satisfied with their lives (World Happiness Report). But can the suffering of the minority be compensated by the happiness of the majority? Can the aggregated happiness compensate the extreme suffering of even a single person?

“If one had an imagination vivid enough and sympathy sufficiently sensitive really to comprehend and to feel the sufferings of other people, one would never have a moment's peace of mind. A really sympathetic race would not so much as know the meaning of happiness. But luckily, we aren't a sympathetic race (...). One is always alone in suffering; the fact is depressing when one happens to be the sufferer, but it makes pleasure possible for the rest of the world.” (Huxley, 132)

In her novel *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* Ursula K. LeGuin describes a city where the good fortune of the citizens requires that an innocent child is tortured in a secret place (LeGuin). The child stands symbolically for the innocence of extreme sufferers. *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* are the people who deny the world. We will associate them with Buddhist monks in this paper, i.e. with childlessness and retreat.

The metaphor suggests that individual happiness is ambivalent. The joy of the majority is at the cost of a suffering minority; one is not possible without the other. There is no doubt that the human suffering in this world is caused by procreation, but the relation is *indirect*. Parents participate in an immensely complex system of interactions and probabilities. Often a contingent event decides who becomes a victim. As a consequence, participants deny the responsibility for the results of the system – a phenomenon which is also known in the context of *structural violence* (Galtung). If the human race were a sympathetic race, it could walk away from *Omelas*. But the majority is frightened by the imagination of a world without humans and prefers a silent agreement according to which the torture of a few is tolerable.

The *Omelas* metaphor suggests that the majority lacks compassion. However, it is possible to see things quite differently.

Metaphor 2: The Dictatorship of the Worst-Off

In game theory a strategy which attempts to minimize the maximum loss is called *Maximin*. In population ethics *Maximin* ranks populations according to the welfare of the worst off: The lower the welfare of the worst off, the worse the moral rank of the whole population (Arrhenius, 99-100).

Maximin encounters the following problem:

If the worst off life has higher welfare in one population as compared to another one, then the former population is always better and the differences in the welfare of the other lives do not matter at all. The slightest gain in welfare for one person outweighs a very large loss for any number of people (Arrhenius, 101). In the words of Gustav Arrhenius:

“One could say that *Maximin* imposes a dictatorship of the worst off. In general, I think that these principles give too much weight to the welfare of the worst off, since they don’t allow for any trade-offs between gains in the welfare of the worst off and losses in the welfare of those who are better off.” (Arrhenius, 102)

If *Maximin* is applied to the *Omelas* metaphor, then the suffering child becomes a moral dictator and creates a kind of inverse injustice. Every citizen has to sacrifice his/her fortune in order to improve the well-being of a single person – a moral claim which is rejected by the majority. One could argue that this rejection is justified because leaving *Omelas* threatens the survival of the community. But the majority rejects even quite manageable sacrifices under much less threatening circumstances. Average car drivers, for example, consider the current speed limits to be rational (or too low), despite the fact that road accidents kill more people than interpersonal violence and war (World Health Organization, 9):

“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)

The majority view turns into the minority view, like a picture puzzle, if family members or close friends are struck by a horrible accident, illness or crime. Changing intuitions are driven by changing interests (Contestabile 2010, 109-111). But how should we weigh individual interests? Is there something like an “objective” view, which deviates from the majority view? The most prominent answer to this question is given in decision theory and game theory (Binmore). For this reason, we connect the further exploration with a casino metaphor.

Metaphor 3: The Casino

*You can't win.
You can't break even.
You can't even quit the game.*

Ginsberg's Theorem
(Bloch, 18)

Life resembles a casino insofar as contingency is a major determinant of life satisfaction (Hampe). Imagine that humans are born with an addiction to participate in a random number game, named *Roulette*. The optimists are convinced they will win, but science suggests that the long-term odds are in favour of the bank. The gambler's maximum win is a feeling of ecstasy, but the maximum loss is so horrible that it is repressed by most participants. If the unlucky gamblers could pass their experience to the untroubled ones, the latter would act more cautiously. But words are inadequate to convey the message, and for the lucky gamblers it is impossible to perceive the magnitude of danger.

Is this metaphor realistic or is it biased?

Young people – with little experience in suffering – have a better opinion about life than old ones, lucky people have a better opinion than unlucky ones. In order to exclude this kind of temporary and biased opinion we delegate the valuation to an impartial observer. The concept of *impartiality* goes back to Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant and was taken up in the 20th century by John Rawls and John Harsanyi.

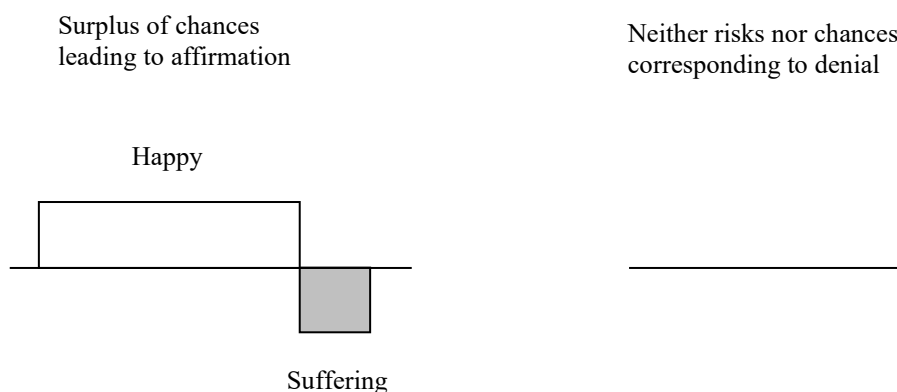
- In Rawls' theory the observer has to derive the fundamental principles of justice without knowing anything about his/her position within society – he/she has to decide behind a *veil of ignorance* (Rawls 118-123). According to Rawls it is rational to apply the *Maximin* principle in such a situation. *Maximin* expresses a high risk-aversion, i.e. a special concern for the possibility to end up in the position of the worst-off.
- Harsanyi thinks that Rawls overemphasizes the unlikely case to end up in the position of the worst-off (Harsanyi 1975, 596). He assumes that the observer can find him/-herself *with equal probability* in every possible position in the society (Harsanyi 1977, 632). Under these premises it is rational to *maximize the expected utility*.

In Rawls' and Harsanyi's concepts the observer is at the same time a lawmaker. In our case, however, the observer's only task is to compare the populated world with an empty world from a strictly hedonistic and impartial point of view. The ethical consequences of the valuation are beyond the scope of this paper.

An impartial observer, who must evaluate the *Casino* resembles a candidate gambler, who has to decide about entering the *Casino*. A candidate gambler would first of all attempt to lift the *veil of ignorance* and look for empirical data about outcomes and probabilities:

- An obvious approach is to interpret the *surveys on subjective life satisfaction* as probability distributions for life's risks and chances. If welfare is interpersonally comparable and cardinally measurable as in most of these surveys (World Happiness Report), then the situation can be depicted in a two-parameter diagram with the size of the population represented by column width and welfare (percentage or point scale) represented by column height (left hand side of Fig.1).
- The *denial of the world from an impartial view* corresponds to the candidate's denial of the *Casino* (right hand side of Fig.1).

Fig.1
Probability distribution



The availability of a probability distribution allows applying Harsanyi's *expected-utility maximization*:

- With the distribution on the left-hand side of Fig.1 the expected utility (welfare) is greater than zero, because the chance to become happy is far greater than the risk to become suffering.
 - If the *Casino* is denied, then the utility is zero.
- Consequently, it is rational to enter the *Casino*.

The empirical data looks encouraging and seems to conflict with our disquieting metaphor. But is the above interpretation of surveys the proper basis for evaluating the *Casino*? Or is there – somewhere hidden within the surveys' metric – a disregarded asymmetry between happiness and suffering?

The Asymmetry between Happiness and Suffering

The *Casino* metaphor suggests that the information of the suffering people is not properly accounted for, so that the perception of the *Casino's* risks is distorted. In order to explore this thesis, we have a closer look at the metric, which is used in surveys.

Let us assume there was a survey asking:

What is your life satisfaction on the following scale?

- *very happy*
- *happy*
- *neutral*
- *suffering*
- *severely suffering*

The assumed survey showed the following result:

- 80% of the respondents answered that they are *happy*.
- 20% of the respondents answered that they are *suffering*.

How can the value of happiness be compared with the value of suffering?

Most researchers deny that the results of surveys on subjective life satisfaction can be transformed into cardinal values. But usually, cardinality creeps in through the backdoor, in the form of taking averages. If the scale is ordinal (like the one above) then taking averages does not make sense. Yet most researchers publishing on subjective life satisfaction *do* use averages and therefore implicitly accept cardinality (Hirata, 5-6).

The calculation of averages requires assigning a cardinal value to each ordinal value:

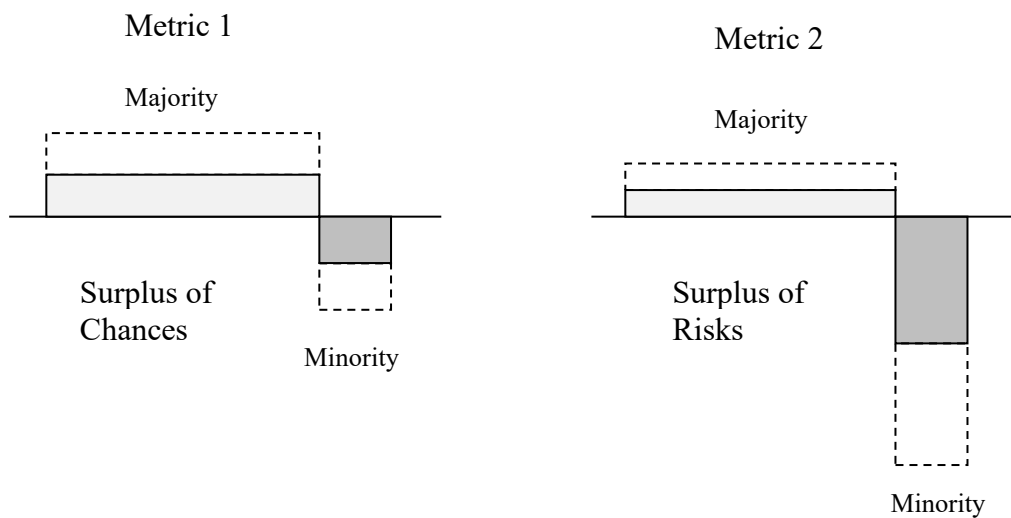
- Point scales can be interpreted as linear cardinal scales (middle column of the table below). Since points are positive numbers, total welfare is necessarily positive as well.
- If a signed cardinal scale is used (right hand side of the table below), then total welfare can theoretically be negative (Inglehart, 269). This is the interesting case in our context.

ordinal	points	cardinal
very happy	5	+2
happy	4	+1
neutral	3	0
suffering	2	-1
severely suffering	1	-2

The left-hand side of [Fig.2](#) shows a transformation with the signed cardinal scale: Maximal happiness (+2) and maximal suffering (-2) are depicted by dashed rectangles.

- *happy* (+1) is depicted by the light shaded rectangle.
- *suffering* (-1) is depicted by the dark shaded rectangle.

Fig.2
Metrics for measuring risk



The average life satisfaction can now be calculated as follows:

- 80% of the respondents are *happy* (+1) = +0.8
- 20% of the respondents are *suffering* (-1) = -0.2

Average life satisfaction = +0.6 on a [-2, +2] scale.

The chances in the *Casino* can be calculated by accumulating the possible outcomes times probability:

- the probability to be *happy* (+1) is 80%,
- the probability to be *suffering* (-1) is 20%.

The chances are therefore $(+1)(80\%) + (-1)(20\%) = +0.6$ on a [-2, +2] scale.

In other words: If we interpret the survey as a probability distribution, then the chances in the *Casino* correspond to the average life satisfaction.

The advantages of a cardinal scale are obvious; the corresponding transformation, however, is far from obvious:

- *Metric 1* in Fig.2 applies a symmetric (linear) transformation. happiness and suffering are given the same weight.
- *Metric 2* in Fig.2 applies an asymmetric (nonlinear) transformation. Happiness is given less weight than suffering.

Why should *metric 1* be more plausible than *metric 2*? It is well possible that the highest degree of suffering is much more intense than the highest degree of happiness.

Psychometrics confirms the asymmetric nature of happiness and suffering:

- Positive and negative affect carry different information and need to be separately measured and analysed (Diener).
- Life satisfaction entails a cognitive evaluation (and not merely an affect), but emotional states are closely related to life evaluations (World Happiness Report, 10).

The best-known description of an asymmetry is the *First Noble Truth* of Buddhism – a worrying claim according to which (global) suffering cannot be compensated by happiness. In Western philosophy we find a similar metric, for example, in the writings of Arthur Schopenhauer, but usually the devaluation of happiness is less radical than in Buddhism. The description concentrates more on ethical priorities and less on metric. Following some examples:

- “We should realize that from the moral point of view happiness and suffering must not be treated as symmetrical; that is to say, the promotion of happiness is in any case much less urgent than the rendering of help to those who suffer, and the attempt to prevent suffering.” (Popper, 235 note 6(2)). Similarly, (Popper, 284).
- “Benefitting people matters more the worse off these people are.” (Parfit, 101)
- “Even classical utilitarians admit that in most cases the reduction of suffering should have a higher priority than the promotion of happiness.” (Fricke, 14)

Ethical Priority and Metric

Since there is no direct measure for comparing happiness with suffering, we could use ethical priorities as an *indirect measure*:

“It is more important to relieve suffering than to increase (already happy people’s) happiness. We can retain this important intuition (...) by giving more weight to negative welfare than to positive welfare.” (Arrhenius, 138)

There are basically two ways to increase the weight of negative welfare:

1. If the metric is given – as in the context of *economic* welfare – then we can apply a weighing function. The lower the level of welfare, the more weight is assigned. This concept is known as *prioritarianism*.
2. In the context of *general* welfare, the weight of suffering must be expressed in the metric itself:

“(...) we have no metric for a person’s good that is independent of the priority we assign it.” (Broome, 222)

Let us assume that the resources are limited and that we can support alternatively a happy person or a suffering person in [Fig.2](#). If we consider supporting the suffering person to be five times as important as supporting the happy person, then we must design the hedonistic scale according to *metric 2*. Within *metric 2* it is intuitively clear that a percentage reduction of suffering contributes more to total welfare than a percentage increase of happiness.

Estimations like “supporting the suffering person is five times as important” depend on personal experience and/or empathy. Imagine that the happy majority and the suffering minority belong to the same family. In this case the experiences would be “closer” and empathy stronger. If all experiences could be integrated within the *same* person, then empathy would be perfect. An observer who has to evaluate life’s risks and chances should exercise a perfect empathy and know the different levels of happiness and suffering by experience.

Perfect empathy provides a correct metric for measuring the asymmetry between happiness and suffering, whereas current surveys suggest symmetric (linear) scales. Possibly Buddha was a perfectly empathic observer, and the *First Noble Truth* is a truth indeed. However, since there is no consensus on the impact of perfect empathy, the normative force of such an approach is limited. In this paper there is no claim that *metric 2* is the correct metric. We will instead focus on the finding that the metric for comparing happiness with suffering is *uncertain*.

Uncertainty-aversion

In [Fig.2](#) we assumed that the chances in the *Casino* can be calculated by accumulating the possible outcomes with their probability.

The assumption, however, that outcomes and probabilities can be derived from statistical data is unrealistic:

- People who are directly involved in accidents, wars, crimes, severe diseases, strokes, natural catastrophes etc., as well as dying people do not participate in surveys.
- The environment is dynamic, particularly in high-tech societies. Technological change occurs faster than natural change and has a profound influence on life's risks and chances.

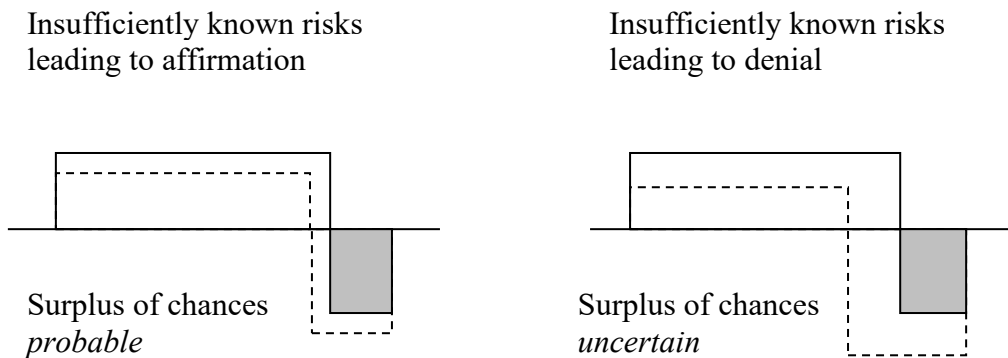
In high-tech societies it is theoretically possible to change the rules of the *Casino* in favour of the gamblers. Adherents of transhumanism, for example, believe that they will be able to reduce or even eliminate suffering (Bostrom, 16). If it were indeed possible to limit the risks, then the *Casino* metaphor would lose much of its dramatic effect. The same is true for the *Omelas* metaphor if it were possible to improve the situation of the child. Current risk estimations, however, suggest that the mentioned metaphors will not lose their explanatory power very soon. Whereas *natural* risks only change in large time periods, *technological* risks steadily increase (Birnbacher, 25). The preliminary culmination of this increase was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, a confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union which threatened to escalate into a full-scale nuclear war (Rees, 26). We cannot exclude that the technological improvement of welfare has to be “paid for” by increasing risk, and that evolution is characterized by a worsening of the risk-benefit ratio (Contestabile 2014, 298-311).

Pessimistic risk estimations are highly controversial, but we are not forced to take sides in this debate. It is sufficient to assess that there is a potential for previously unknown catastrophes and that the probabilities are *uncertain*. Given the uncertainty of the metric, the outcomes and the probabilities, we have to apply the theory of decisions under uncertainty. In contrast to Rawls, however, we will not make assumptions about the impartial observer's risk-aversion. Experimentally people show uncertainty-aversion *independent* of risk-aversion. Being averse to known risk is different from being averse to gambling with insufficient information about the odds (Hurley, 372-382).

In the following we investigate two levels of uncertainty. The pictures in [Fig.3](#) combine the uncertainty of the metric with the uncertainty of the forecast. The cited publications refer to *economic* welfare. In the context of *general* welfare uncertainty-aversion is even higher because the worst cases of suffering are at stake.

Fig.3

Knowledge about risks



1. Probabilities are insufficiently known but a *surplus of chances is probable* (Fig.3 left hand side):
 - a. If we assume that the *solid* line is realistic, then the utility (accumulated outcomes times probability) is greater than zero.
 - b. If we assume that the *dashed* line is realistic, then the utility is smaller, but still greater than zero.
 - c. If we deny the *Casino*, the utility is zero.Since – in our context – rationality is associated with *expected-utility maximization* (Harsanyi 1975, 594) it is rational to affirm the *Casino*.

2. Probabilities are insufficiently known, and a *surplus of chances is uncertain* (Fig.3 right hand side):
 - a. If we assume that the *solid* line is realistic, then the utility is greater than zero.
 - b. If we assume that the *dashed* line is realistic, then the utility is smaller than zero.
 - c. If we deny the *Casino*, the utility is zero.Since we cannot exclude case 2b (negative utility), it is possible that case 2c (zero utility) is the better option. In such a situation it is rational to use the *smallest maximal loss* as a secondary criterion (Angner, 14 ff.). Consequently, it is rational to deny the *Casino*.

As long as we do not know which of the two pictures in Fig.3 is more realistic, we cannot decide whether it is rational to affirm or to deny the *Casino*.

Conclusion

From a strictly hedonistic and impartial perspective it is uncertain if life's chances outweigh the risks. There is no indisputable metric for measuring risks and no reliable forecast. Given this uncertainty the *denial of the world* cannot easily be dismissed as being irrational.

New Findings

In 2022 a group of researchers published an empirical study on population ethical intuitions, which confirms a theoretical assumption made in this paper. In valuing entire populations, the majority's intuitions are *asymmetric* about happiness and suffering. If this asymmetry is applied to the life evaluations of the World Happiness Report, then the aggregated total turns negative; see *Is There a Predominance of Suffering?*, available from www.philarchive.org.

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Further information on the topic of negative total welfare can be found at www.socrethics.com