

Too Easy, Too Good, Too Late?

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Abstract: Plausibly, one important part of a good life is doing work that makes a *contribution*, or a positive difference to the world. In this paper, however, I explore *contribution pessimism*, the view that people will not always have adequate opportunities for making contributions. I distinguish between three interestingly different and at least initially plausible reasons why this view might be true: in slogan form, things might become *too easy*, they might become *too good*, or we might be *too late*. Now, one response to these problems might be to deliberately attempt to undo them. However, I claim that this solution is intuitively misguided, and argue that explaining this supports a holistic approach to the value of contributions. Finally, I argue that if contribution pessimism is correct, it could provide an explanation of some widely held intuitions about issues in population ethics, and could weaken the case for focusing on addressing risks of human extinction rather than other social causes.

1. Introduction

It is intuitive to think that one important part of the good life, alongside things such as pleasure, friendship, and knowledge, is achievement.¹ And in particular, we think it's important that we achieve something *valuable*, that we make a positive difference to the world: in other words, we want to make a *contribution*.

If this is right, then one important condition for having a good life is whether one has adequate *opportunities* to make contributions. And we cannot always take it for granted that this

¹ On the nature and value of achievement, see Bradford 2015 and 2016.

condition will be met. So it is reasonable to be concerned about what opportunities are available. For example, from an individual perspective, it is reasonable to care about whether you have the opportunity to pursue a career where you can do useful work, and from a political perspective, it is reasonable to care about how opportunities for making contributions are distributed.

My focus in this paper, however, is not these personal and distributive concerns about the opportunities for making contributions, but rather a more global concern. Will there always be adequate opportunities for making contributions available to people in general? We can call the view that we should expect to run out of opportunities for making contributions *contribution pessimism*.

Some of the themes relevant to this issue have cropped up in particular contexts, perhaps most notably with relation to the issue of technological unemployment, but also in discussions of Bernard Williams's argument that immortality would be intolerably boring, and in Bernard Suits's reflections on what sorts of activities would be available in utopia.² But contribution pessimism has not yet been directly addressed in the philosophical literature.

In this paper, I myself am aiming to make three main contributions. The first is to show that there are in fact three interestingly different, and at least initially plausible, reasons why contribution pessimism might be true: in slogan form, things might become *too easy*, they might become *too good*, or we might be *too late*. We will see that the likelihood of these scenarios turns out to depend partly on some speculative questions which we are plausibly not currently in a position to answer. But overall, I argue, there is enough evidence in favor of contribution

² On technological unemployment, see Keynes 1963, Danaher 2017, and Kim and Scheller-Wolf 2019. For an overview of the literature on immortality, see Pereira and Timmerman 2020; for Suits's discussion, see Suits 2014: 179–196.

pessimism to make it a challenge worth grappling with.

The other two contributions I want to make are to show how contribution pessimism could be instructive if it did turn out to be correct. The second concerns a possible practical solution to this challenge: even if we do end up facing the problems the pessimist is worried about, we might simply deliberately undo the causes of these problems so as to create opportunities for ourselves. However, I claim that this solution is intuitively misguided, and I argue that explaining this supports a holistic approach to the value of contributions. Finally, my third aim is to show that, if correct, contribution pessimism could provide an explanation of some widely held intuitions about issues in population ethics, and could weaken the case for focusing on addressing risks of human extinction rather than other social causes.

I proceed as follows. In §2, I discuss the importance of making contributions. In §§3–5, I distinguish and present the case in favor of the three problems tied to contribution pessimism. In §6, I discuss the idea of responding to these problems by deliberately undoing their causes, and argue that reflecting on this idea supports a holistic view about the value of contributions. In §7, I discuss how contribution pessimism bears on population ethics. §8 concludes by reviewing some limitations to the scope of the argument.

2. The importance of making a contribution

Let's begin by discussing why we might think that achievements in general, and contributions in particular, are important parts of the good life.

According to Gwen Bradford, an achievement is a difficult and competent process that culminates in a product, outcome, or goal.³ But however we analyze it, achievement is widely

³ Bradford 2015: 17.

accepted as a leading contender for one of the things that is non-instrumentally good for us. While hedonistic and desire-satisfaction theories of well-being would imply that achievement is valuable only insofar as it brings about pleasure or desire satisfaction, achievement is standardly taken to be one of the main candidates for basic welfare value to be included in objective list, perfectionist, and hybrid theories.⁴ We can see why by comparing the lives of people who achieve things with the lives of those who do not. For example, we might compare the life of a scientist whose dedicated efforts lead to a cure for a rare disease with an alternative life in which she spends her days watching TV (and so does not engage in much activity at all), or in which her efforts to find the cure fail (and so she does not bring about the aimed-at outcome). In each case, it is plausible that the former life is the one that is better for her. Likewise, achievement is one of the things that seem to be missing from a life in an experience machine; and as Thomas Hurka has recently argued, achievement is in many respects a mirror image of knowledge, another leading candidate for basic welfare value.⁵ For the purposes of this discussion, I will be supposing that some non-subjectivist approach to well-being is correct, and so that achievement really does have basic welfare value.

Note that on Bradford's analysis, something can count as an achievement even if its product, outcome, or goal is not something valuable, like the cure for a disease. Bradford argues that climbing Mt. Everest counts as an achievement, for example, even though its goal, standing on top of a mountain, is not valuable. Moreover, she argues, the product of an achievement could

⁴ For examples of objective-list theories that include achievement, see Fletcher 2013: 214 and Hurka 2009: Chap. 5.

On perfectionism and achievement, see Bradford 2015: 114–123.

⁵ Hurka 2020. On the experience machine, see Nozick 1974: 42–45 and Bramble 2016.

even have negative value, as in the case of a daring and clever heist.⁶ However, it is plausible that achievements that do have valuable products—as a first pass, what we can call *contributions*—represent an especially significant category. And in particular, it is plausible that these achievements are especially important to our well-being, and more valuable contributions make our lives better than less valuable contributions.⁷ For example, compare the life of the scientist who cures the rare disease with a life in which she instead devotes her research to scientifically uninteresting questions, and so the outcome she brings about is not valuable. Again, it is plausible that the former life is the one that is better for her (as well as for those with the disease). It may also help to think about this issue from the first-person perspective. The thought that one might end up doing nothing useful with one’s life can be pretty depressing.

Plausibly, however, it matters not only whether one has achieved something valuable, but also whether you have thereby made the world better than it would have been otherwise. For example, if you help your nephew with his homework, then you might take credit for having brought about a good outcome. Even so, if he would have figured it out himself anyway, and if doing so would not even have taken him any additional time or effort, then there seems to be at least one important sense in which you did not really make a contribution.⁸ To be more precise,

⁶ Ibid.: 20–25.

⁷ This claim is suggested by Griffin 1986: 27 and Griffin 1996: 19–20. Hurka 2006 and Bradford 2015 endorse the related view that achievements with more valuable products are thereby more (impartially) intrinsically valuable (Hurka 2006: 233; Bradford 2015: 160–170). Other useful discussions include Dworkin 2000: 250–254, Portmore 2008, and Hirji 2019.

⁸ Nefsky 2017 argues that there is a morally significant sense in which we can *help* to bring about some outcome without making a difference to that outcome. However, note that for contribution pessimism to be worth caring about, we don’t need to think that achievements that make a difference are the only ones that matter; we just need to

then, we can say that a *contribution*, in a sense particularly important for well-being, is an achievement which makes a positive difference to the world.

Suits also suggests this point in a dialogue imagining a world in which technological advances have made all instrumental activities unnecessary. While people might still choose to pursue the kinds of activities that figured in earlier careers, Suits suggests, they would do so only as a sort of game. But as Suits's character Skepticus remarks, "People like to be building houses, or running large corporations, or doing scientific research to some purpose, you know, not just for the hell of it." Suits's Grasshopper goes on to suggest that many people may come to doubt whether this kind of life is even worth living.⁹

Now, again, adherents of hedonistic and desire-satisfaction theories of well-being are likely to resist these claims. It is worth noting, however, that even if we deny that achievements in general, and contributions in particular, are valuable for us in the sense of promoting our *well-being*, we might nevertheless think they are valuable for us in the sense of making our lives *meaningful*. And proposed accounts of meaning in life have in fact emphasized something like making a contribution, in our sense. For example, Aaron Smuts proposes that what makes a life meaningful just is bringing about certain good or valuable states of affairs, while Susan Wolf proposes that what makes a life meaningful is bringing about good or valuable ends while being satisfied by doing so.¹⁰ On these views, then, even if lacking opportunities to make a contribution would not make us *worse off*, there is still an important sense in which it would make our lives poorer. For the sake of simplicity, however, when I talk about the value of contributions, I will

think that these achievements are especially important to our well-being.

⁹ Suits 2014: 194–195.

¹⁰ Smuts 2013; Wolf 2010.

have well-being in mind, unless stated otherwise.

I have suggested that, intuitively, whether we make a contribution, that is, a positive difference to the world, has an important impact on our well-being. However, it is worth taking care to reflect on whether our intuitions really do favor this view over two alternative views that some might find attractive.

One alternative view is that what matters is not whether we achieve something valuable, but merely that we achieve something significant. For example, consider an entrepreneur who develops a yogurt brand which become very popular, but does not actually make people's lives better than they would have been in the world where this brand had never existed (in which, suppose, people would have ended up enjoying some other yogurt instead). The entrepreneur thereby makes a significant but neutral impact on the world.

There are a few things to be said about this case. First, we can grant that any achievement, including achievements with neutral products, makes a positive impact on well-being, in which case we can admit that the life of the entrepreneur does have something to be said for it over the life of someone who does not achieve anything. Second, if we compare the life of this entrepreneur with that of an entrepreneur whose product actually *does* improve people's lives, it seems intuitive that the latter life would be even better. So it seems clear that whether the product of one's achievement is valuable does make at least some difference to well-being.

The question, then, is whether this difference is great enough to make contribution pessimism worth being concerned about. Let's again consider the issue from the subject's own perspective. Suppose that the entrepreneur wakes up one night and thinks: "My career's been successful, but so what? Sure, everyone's eating my yogurts, but if I'd never gone into this

business, they'd just be eating some other yogurt instead." My intuition, at any rate, is that these doubts would be perfectly sensible. This suggests that a life with neutral though significant achievements really would be significantly poorer than a life with valuable achievements.

The second alternative view is that what matters is not whether we achieve something valuable, but merely that we achieve something that we care about. It might be said, for example, that while the entrepreneur could be right to think that she is worse off for having failed to make a real contribution, this might just be because making a contribution is what she happens to care about. If she didn't happen to care about making a contribution, but only about having a successful career, then she would not be worse off, or at least not much worse off.

I have three responses to this suggestion. First, even if the value of contributions does depend on whether we happen to care about that, a disposition to care about this might in fact be a widespread personality trait in people and not easily gotten rid of. In that case, contribution pessimism could still in practice raise a serious challenge, at least in the near term.¹¹ Second, while I admit that there is some plausibility to the thought that the importance of an achievement to our well-being depends largely on whether we happen to care about it, this might derive from the plausibility of more general subjectivist views like desire satisfactionism. So this thought might not be so compelling if we take care to set those views aside and embrace the objectivist mindset. And third, suppose that, prior to her moment of doubt, the entrepreneur had in fact cared only about having a successful career, and not about making a contribution. Even in that case, her doubts strike me as perfectly sensible.

There are other alternative views that it would be worth fleshing out and considering. For

¹¹ Similarly, Suits suggests that many people may by nature be diligent "ants" rather than playful "grasshoppers" (Suits 2014: 179–196). Keynes 1963 makes a similar suggestion.

example, one might think that instead of devoting ourselves to making contributions, it would be just as valuable to engage in “atelic” (roughly, non-goal-oriented) activities such as theoretical contemplation.¹² Or one might think that while an achievement’s product might need to meet a certain minimal threshold of value in order to constitute a valuable contribution, it is not the case that achievements become more valuable the more valuable the product is.¹³ However, I hope that the importance of contributions is now at least initially plausible enough to think that it could be a serious concern if our opportunities to make contributions were threatened. Let’s now turn to how such threats might in fact loom before us.

3. The replacement problem

Now that we have discussed what contributions are and why they are valuable, I will distinguish between and argue for the plausibility of three interestingly different reasons why contribution pessimism might be true. In this section, we will start by considering the first reason: the *replacement problem*.

The replacement problem refers to the possibility that one’s work could be partly or entirely replaced by someone or something else. In that case, things would be “too easy” in the sense that producing valuable outcomes no longer requires us to make any effort.¹⁴ This would threaten our opportunities to make contributions because we are understanding contributions as

¹² See Seitya 2014.

¹³ For example, Hirji 2019 suggests that the value of the product can be relevant to the value of the achievement, but only indirectly, because it can bear on whether the achievement counts as fully realizing or expressing particular perfectionist capacities.

¹⁴ Versions of this problem can be found in Schopenhauer 2015: Sect. 152 and Suits 2014: 179–196. It is also a recurring theme in fiction, see e.g. Brahm 1960.

achievements that make a positive difference to the world: that make things better than they would have been otherwise. As a result, even if I do produce some valuable outcome, if someone or something else would have produced the same outcome in my place, then what I have done has not made the world any better than it would have been otherwise.

To illustrate the problem, consider the following example:

Sisyphus's Co-Worker: After eons of watching Sisyphus push his boulder to the summit of the hill, only to see it roll back down again, the gods announce that it is time for a change. The next time the boulder reaches the summit, they will allow it to remain there, where it will be used to build a marvelous temple. Not only that, but they have summoned Heracles to help him. Heracles, of course, could push the boulder to the summit by himself without breaking a sweat.

Now, at first, Sisyphus might think that his labors will finally accomplish something. However, on reflection, he should realize that the gods are simply toying with him in a subtler way. Sisyphus no longer needs to do any work in order to get the boulder to the summit; he can just let Heracles do it. Of course, Sisyphus could decide to ignore Heracles, and push the boulder himself anyway. However, because Heracles is available, this labor would not be making a positive difference. Sisyphus could not even say that he at least saved Heracles some effort, since Heracles could have done the work so easily.

The pessimist can argue that the prospect of technological unemployment threatens to put all of us in Sisyphus's position. Technological unemployment is the idea that human workers in general will be replaced by machines, without creating new work of other kinds for humans to do

(as has been the case in previous technological disruptions).¹⁵ If these machines are available to do our work for us, then any work we did would not be making a difference.

The likelihood and timescale of technological unemployment are complex and speculative empirical matters. However, there is some reason to think that a move toward a situation of widespread technological unemployment is already starting to happen, though the evidence is not clear cut.¹⁶ In addition, and relatedly, there have been significant advances in the development of artificial intelligence. A recent survey of experts suggested that there is a 50% chance of AI outperforming humans in all tasks within 45 years, and of automating all human jobs within 120 years.¹⁷ Many experts even believe that we are likely to create systems with superhuman levels of general intelligence by the end of this century.¹⁸ Technological unemployment, then, does seem to pose a real threat to our opportunities for making contributions.

4. The improvement problem

Let's turn now to the second reason why contribution pessimism might be true: the *improvement problem*. This is the idea that one might run out of opportunities to make a positive difference as a result of the fact that things are already going too well. We can distinguish two versions of this problem. One way of making a positive difference is to prevent an *undesirable* outcome; another is by promoting positively desirable outcomes. Things might become “too good,” then, in the

¹⁵ Again, see Keynes 1963, Danaher 2017, Kim and Scheller-Wolf 2019.

¹⁶ For an informal overview of the empirical evidence and expert surveys, see Alexander 2018.

¹⁷ Grace et al. 2018.

¹⁸ Bostrom 2014: Chap. 1.

sense that some undesirable possibilities have been eliminated, and so one no longer has them as problems to solve.¹⁹ Or it might turn out that things are not only problem-free, but they are going so positively well that it is not clear how one could make them even better.

To illustrate, let's continue our story:

Sisyphus's Garden: Sisyphus is given a new assignment: he is now to serve as the gardener for Zeus's estate. He spends his days looking for weeds to dig, and for new places to plant flowers. But he can never find any weeds, and every corner of the grounds is already teeming with flowers.

I will now explain how the pessimist can argue that we face a version of this problem. To start, plausibly, a central way of making positive differences to the world is by promoting well-being. Next, the pessimist can cite empirical evidence that, along a variety of dimensions, people's well-being has been significantly improving, largely as a result of technological developments.²⁰ These developments have also created some risks to our survival, but the pessimist can argue that if we do manage to avoid extinction (which would also destroy our opportunities to make contributions), we have reason to expect these trends to continue.²¹

Finally, the pessimist can argue that the more well-being increases, the fewer opportunities there will be to make a contribution by benefiting people. There are three reasons for this.

¹⁹ Compare Setiya 2017: 29–53.

²⁰ See Pinker 2018, Roser 2020. For criticism, see Hickel 2019.

²¹ On extinction risks, see Ord 2020.

First, there is the phenomenon of diminishing marginal returns to life satisfaction: the wealthier someone is, the less impact additional wealth has on their life satisfaction.²² Thus, as people get richer, it will become more and more costly to improve their life satisfaction. This is bad news for would-be altruists, since even if we reject subjectivist theories of well-being, life satisfaction is still plausibly an important element in well-being. If it turns out that the cost of improving other people's life satisfaction grows faster than altruists' own wealth does, then the power of altruists to improve other people's life satisfaction, and thereby their well-being, will decline over time.

Second, when we look at the non-material ways in which life has been improving, there is also reason to think that the opportunities of would-be altruists will decline over time. On the negative side, a variety of specific problems plaguing people (on any plausible account of well-being) might simply be eliminated. For example, the world has made significant progress toward eliminating risks of death from starvation, violence, smallpox, accidents, and childbirth.²³ On the positive side, people have arguably made dramatic gains when it comes to plausible objectivist goods such as knowledge and autonomy. After all, thanks in part to economic progress, we have seen dramatic improvements to literacy and basic education.²⁴ And it is also plausible that escaping from poverty has enabled many people to enjoy much greater control over their lives. But it is also plausible that, unless this progress unravels, then would-be altruists will not always be able to find similarly significant ways of benefiting people. Providing others with a doctorate-

²² In particular, economic studies indicate that a doubling of income always increases reported life satisfaction by the same amount. See Stevenson and Wolfers 2013.

²³ Pinker 2018.

²⁴ On literacy and basic education, see Roser 2020.

level education is a lot costlier than providing them with a basic education. And plausibly, how much meaningful autonomy is afforded by wealth is also subject to diminishing returns: having your annual income rise from \$500 to \$1,000 plausibly enhances your autonomy a lot more than having it rise from \$100,000 to \$100,500.

Third, we might accept the *prioritarian* view that benefits matter more when they go to the worse off.²⁵ In other words, we might think that it is intrinsically more desirable to benefit someone who is relatively badly off than to give an equally sized benefit someone who is relatively well off. If this is right, then as people get better off, not only will there be fewer opportunities to benefit them as much, but these benefits will also become less and less valuable.

Of course, the idea that things just keep getting better and better might strike some readers as ridiculous; for example, as I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic is killing millions of people, and has disrupted the lives of billions more. Despite this, the pessimist can still argue that even when we take into account the severity of our current problems, the broader historical trends are still very positive. After all, we can see that in the centuries since the Industrial Revolution, life has improved dramatically along a variety of dimensions, including life expectancy, wealth, and many others, even though this period also includes past catastrophes such as the two World Wars and the Great Depression.

Before we move on, it is worth emphasizing that even though the replacement and improvement problems are both connected to technological development, they are essentially different. This may be easier to see when we abstract away from the real-world details by focusing on our toy examples. Again, in *Sisyphus's Co-Worker*, the problem was that someone else was there who would do Sisyphus's work in his place. In *Sisyphus's Garden*, by contrast,

²⁵ For an introduction to prioritarianism, see Holtug 2006.

the problem is that because things are already going so well, there is no work to be done.

5. The completion problem

Our final reason why contribution pessimism might be true is the *completion problem*. The evidence supporting this problem is admittedly more speculative than for the previous problems, but I will again argue that there is at least *prima facie* reason to worry about it, and that the nature of the problem is interestingly different from the other two.

The completion problem is the idea that some contributions concern projects aimed at objects that are by their natures limited. These limitations make it possible that we might either complete the project entirely, or complete enough of it that we drastically reduce how much of the work is still available to be done. At that point, it is “too late” to pursue those projects.

To illustrate this problem, we can turn from Sisyphus to Alexander the Great, who supposedly wept at having no more worlds to conquer. Alexander’s problem was simply that the world was finite; there was only so much of it there to be conquered. As a result, the project of conquering the world was one that could be completed.

This is related to a problem that Kieran Setiya raises in his discussion of the phenomenon of the midlife crisis.²⁶ Setiya proposes a distinction between *telic* and *atelic* activities. A telic activity, such as solving a math problem, is one that includes in its nature a terminal point at which it will count as having been completed, while an atelic activity, such as going for a walk, does not. Setiya argues, following Schopenhauer, that there is something essentially tragic about building one’s life around telic activities, since working towards the completion of these activities means working towards the destruction of the things that are giving one’s life meaning.

The problem I am raising here, however, concerns projects that are not only completable

²⁶ Setiya 2014.

in principle, but that are completable in practice. That is, the problem I am interested in arises for projects where, not only does it *make sense* to talk about what it would mean for a project to be completed, but also where the nature of the task is such that it could actually be completed. For example, Alexander was engaging in a telic activity, because it makes sense to talk about what it would mean to have conquered the world. And this remains true even if the world had turned out to be infinite. Alexander might still face the Schopenhauerian problem of spending his life working to complete and thereby destroy the very project that gave his life meaning, even if he knew that the project would never in fact be completed. But a finite world is one that could actually be conquered.

How can the pessimist argue that we might find ourselves facing this problem? In our discussion of the improvement problem, we focused on contributions that aimed at promoting well-being. One might claim that even if the opportunities for these kinds of contributions do diminish, we can simply turn to other kinds of contributions. In particular, two natural alternatives would be contributions to intellectual inquiry and to the creation of art. But both of these domains, the pessimist could suggest, might end up being limited in principle. Perhaps there is only so much to know about the world, and perhaps there are only so many good and interestingly different artworks to be created.

Let's start with intellectual inquiry. Now, only the most ambitious pessimist would worry that we might find ourselves with absolutely no more scientific, philosophical, or other intellectual questions to answer. But a more moderate pessimist might worry that we might gradually deplete the supply of fundamental or interesting questions left to answer. As time goes on, the most fundamental and interesting questions might be either answered or found to be intractable, and what remains for us to figure out might be mere details.

For example, the pessimist might suggest, it might well turn out that there are only so many fundamental laws of nature for scientists to discover. For example, physicists believe that we now have a very good handle on the fundamental physical laws.²⁷ Similarly, it is plausible that we might never make any fundamental advance in biology as significant as some of the advances that have already been made, such as the theory of evolution by natural selection. And in fact, there is evidence that the rate of scientific discovery is already slowing down.²⁸

With respect to art, again, there is at least some initial plausibility to the pessimist's case. John Stuart Mill gives a nice statement of the problem in the case of music. In his autobiography, Mill recounts having been

seriously tormented by the thought of the exhaustibility of musical combinations. The five tones and two semitones of the octave can be put together only in a limited number of ways; of these only a small proportion are beautiful; most of these must have been already discovered and there could not be room for a long succession of Mozarts and Webers to strike out as they had done entirely new and surpassingly rich veins of musical beauty.²⁹

Similarly, one might argue that many forms of art, such as novels and films, are essentially vehicles for telling stories, and that there may be only so many stories that we would find both good and interestingly different from each other. However, the question of whether there might

²⁷ Horgan 1996.

²⁸ Bloom et al. 2017.

²⁹ Mill 1981: 149.

only be so many interestingly different artworks in general is one that seems even more disputable and difficult to assess than the question of whether intellectual inquiry could be completed, so I will leave things there.

As before, it is worth noticing how this problem is distinct from the others we have considered. Like the others, the completion problem is related to a kind of progress; while the previous problems were related to technological development, in this case, I have suggested, the pessimist might worry about scientific and artistic progress. But again, in this case, the worry is about whether the projects we are working towards are finite in principle. This is a problem that we might face independently of whether we end up being replaceable, and independently of whether the world is generally getting better.

6. Creating opportunities

I have now introduced and made the case for three reasons why contribution pessimism might be true: the replacement problem, the improvement problem, and the completion problem. In this section, I consider a general practical strategy for responding to these challenges: we might deliberately attempt to undo these problems in order to preserve or create opportunities for us to make contributions. I claim that this strategy is unsuccessful, and suggest that explaining why offers insights into the value of making a contribution.

Here are some examples to illustrate this strategy. In the case of Sisyphus's Co-Worker, Sisyphus might ask Heracles to leave and never come back; by analogy, we might ban development of the technologies that threaten our jobs. In the case of Sisyphus's Garden, Sisyphus might seed the grounds with weeds so that he will have more to dig up later; by analogy, we might try to slow improvements to well-being, so that there will still be social

problems for us to address. Finally, as Suits points out, Alexander might have given back the lands he had conquered so that he could start over; by analogy, we might destroy the records of some of our scientific discoveries, so that we have the opportunity to make them again.³⁰

I submit, however, that there is something intuitively futile about this strategy.³¹ Even when we set aside the negative side-effects of, for example, reintroducing previously eradicated diseases, these efforts simply do not seem to be effective ways of preserving the value of making contributions.

It is puzzling, however, to explain why this would be true. For simplicity, let's focus on the case of Sisyphus's Co-Worker. Once Heracles is out of the picture, Sisyphus's labor does seem to meet the conditions on making a valuable contribution that we set out earlier. His labor is no longer replaceable, so he can now say that he is making a positive difference. So why isn't sending Heracles away the smart move?

We might be tempted to think that Sisyphus's labor does count as a valuable positive contribution, but that his action of sending Heracles away should count as a *negative* contribution, something that takes away from the world, and so as disvaluable. As a result, we might think, taking both of these actions into account, it makes sense why Sisyphus is no better off than he was initially.

However, it is not clear why the action of sending Heracles away should count as a negative contribution, because it is not clear how it makes the world worse in any significant

³⁰ Suits 2014: 192.

³¹ As Aristotle observes, "no one chooses to make war, or even starts a war, for the sake of making war; for if someone turned his friends into enemies to bring about battles and killings he would seem utterly murderous" (Aristotle 2004: 195 [1177b]).

way. After all, we can suppose that Sisyphus is confident that he will successfully push the boulder to the summit once Heracles is gone, so there is no reason to suppose that the temple will not end up getting built.

Here is an alternative explanation. What this case shows is that we need to take a holistic approach to determining the value of a person's contributions to that person's well-being. That is, the welfare-value of a person's contributions is not a matter of seeing what positive or negative differences they make in each particular achievement, using those differences to determining the value or disvalue of the achievement, and then adding all these values together. Instead, the welfare-value of a person's contributions depends on the difference they make in their life as a whole. If we suppose that Heracles would have pushed the boulder to the summit anyway, then what Sisyphus does over the course of his life does not make a difference. This means that when it comes to determining Sisyphus's lifetime well-being, his score with respect to contributions is zero.

However, this is not yet a complete explanation of what is going wrong in the sorts of cases we have had in mind. This is because, in addition to attempting to create opportunities for oneself, one might also attempt to create opportunities for others. For example, Athena might ask Heracles to leave for Sisyphus's sake. In that case, Sisyphus would be making a difference in his life as a whole. But my intuition is still that sending Heracles away would not really solve the problem.

I propose that we need an even more holistic approach. This approach is directed not at the question we have been focusing on up to this point, of how to determine the value of contributions for any particular agent's well-being, but rather at the question of how to determine

the impartial value of contributions—that is, in order to determine how the presence of contributions affects the value of the world as a whole.

Again, I proposed above that the welfare-value of one's contributions depends not on the differences made by each of one's particular achievements, but rather on what difference is made by the total set of one's actions. Now, I propose that the impartial value of the various contributions made by all the agents in some world depends not on the difference made by each individual agent, but rather on the difference made by the set of all agents in that world. In this case, if Athena sends Heracles away, then the actions of all the characters—the gods, Sisyphus, Athena, and Heracles—do end up making a difference: namely, the temple gets built. But the same difference will be made even if Athena does not send Heracles away. So sending Heracles away produces no greater impartial value.

Note that this proposal about the impartial value of contributions does not change anything we said before about the welfare-value of contributions. In the original Sisyphus's Co-Worker case, it is true that, on the proposal now on offer, Sisyphus does play a role, together with the gods, in a set of actions which does make a positive difference, and so what these characters *together* do may in fact involve an impartially valuable contribution. But Sisyphus's own actions still do not make a positive difference, so he still does not make a contribution that adds to his well-being.

Nevertheless, I acknowledge that this proposal is quite ambitious. In developing a full theory, we would need to engage with other problems, such as how the difference made by the total set of agents might interact with the difficulty of the actions performed by particular agents, and we would need to explore its implications across a broader range of cases. Still, this account, while rough, may help to bolster the intuition that we cannot avoid contribution pessimism

simply by creating opportunities for ourselves.

7. Contribution pessimism and population ethics

I will now discuss how contribution pessimism, if correct, could bear on debates in population ethics. In particular, I argue that contribution pessimism could provide us with a new way to justify the intuition that some number of good lives would be “enough.” I also discuss how contribution pessimism has related practical implications about how much importance we should attach to avoiding human extinction.

To start, one of the main views in population ethics is the *Total View*. According to this view, the best outcome is simply the one with the highest aggregate well-being.³² As a result, this view implies that adding well-off people always makes the outcome proportionately better. So, for example, an outcome with a bajillion well-off people would be way better than an outcome with merely a few hundred billion well-off people.

There are several reasons why we might be skeptical of the Total View. The view has some specific implications that we may find counterintuitive.³³ But even apart from these problems, we might also just find it intuitive to think that once there are enough good lives, it is not important to create additional lives. Once everyone on Earth has a good life, we can relax; we do not need to start spreading across the galaxy. To make this intuition more precise, we could claim either that there is some particular number of good lives exceeding which creates no additional value (the *Capped Model*), or that increasing the number of good lives has

³² Parfit 1984: Sect. 130. For a recent introduction to population ethics, see Greaves 2017.

³³ In particular, the so-called “Repugnant Conclusion.” See Parfit 1984: Sect. 131.

diminishing returns (the *Diminishing Value Model*).³⁴

However, these views face two problems. First, these views have implications that may strike us as counterintuitive: in particular, they imply that if we were to find out that there were many more well-off people in the past than we realized, or that there are many well-off aliens elsewhere in the universe, this should make us think it matters much less whether we survive some imminent threat to the survival of humanity.³⁵ Second, these views seem to stand in need of some kind of deeper justification; it might seem as if there would have to be some reason why any particular number would be enough, why adding new lives would have diminishing returns, or why any particular curve of diminishing returns would be correct.

In the face of these problems, we might be tempted by another popular alternative to the Total View: the *Person-Affecting View*. On one formulation of this view, while it is always impartially better that any particular person be better off rather than worse off, it is not impartially better that any person exist in the first place, even if that person would have a life high in well-being.

However, while this view seems less arbitrary than the views that focus on the particular number of lives in existence, it is also more extreme. In particular, among other problems, it has the counterintuitive implication that an empty universe would be no worse than a universe full of flourishing lives.

Contribution pessimism, I suggest, can provide us with a better way to capture the intuition that a certain number of lives might be enough. Suppose we accept a theory of well-being which grants that your well-being can be affected by things other than the contributions

³⁴ Temkin 1997: 294; Temkin 2012: Chap. 10; Beckstead 2013: Chap. 5.

³⁵ Beckstead 2013: Chap. 5.

you make, things such as pleasure, friendship, and so on, and even that you can have a life high in well-being without making any contributions. And suppose we agree with the Person-Affecting View that while it is always impartially better for particular people to be better off rather than worse off, a life high in well-being is not ipso facto impartially valuable. But unlike the Person-Affecting View, suppose we claim that your life *can* be impartially valuable, but only if it makes a significant contribution. That is, we might claim that your life *itself* can add to the overall value of the world only if that life involves achievements that make some *other* positive difference to the world.³⁶

Now suppose contribution pessimism is correct in claiming that either it will at some point no longer be possible for people to make significant contributions with their lives, or the opportunities for making significant contributions will tend to diminish over time. This would then provide us with a deeper explanation of why some number of lives would turn out to be enough. And it could do so without implying that an empty universe would be no worse than a universe full of flourishing lives (so long as these lives involve some significant contributions).

In addition, contribution pessimism can also make it less counterintuitive to think that finding out about past people or aliens should make us think it matters less whether humanity survives. In particular, suppose that the contribution pessimist is right to claim that pursuits like science and art are completable. In that case, if there are enough past people or aliens who have lived wonderful lives, then this might make it more likely that somebody has already made the discoveries that we were hoping to make, or created the artworks that we were hoping to create.

³⁶ Note that these contributions can include improving other people's well-being regardless of whether they themselves make any contributions, since on this view, it is impartially good to benefit anyone who would exist regardless of what you do.

Contribution pessimism also bears on more practical issues connected to population ethics. In particular, Nick Beckstead has relied on a view similar to the Total View to argue that the value of the long-term future could potentially be huge, because our descendants might continue to thrive for millions, billions, or trillions of years. As a result, he argues, reducing the chance of a particular existential risk to humanity, such as threats posed by asteroids or the development of advanced artificial intelligence, by even one in a million could in expectation be far more important than more short-term benefits such as working to aid people in extreme poverty.³⁷ Arguments along these lines have been influential among effective altruists, many of whom have decided as a result to prioritize efforts to address existential risks.³⁸

However, contribution pessimism gives us reason to think that it might not be possible for our descendants to continue to have impartially valuable lives for millions, billions, or trillions of years, because they might run out of opportunities to make contributions much sooner than that. As a result, the value of the future might be much lower than Beckstead thinks. Focusing on existential risks still might be the most important thing to do in expectation, but only if the chance of our efforts making a difference is a bit higher.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored and defended contribution pessimism. I have argued that this view might be true as a result of three interestingly different problems. I have also claimed that we

³⁷ See Beckstead 2013, 2019. Beckstead's work develops related arguments previously offered by Derek Parfit and Nick Bostrom; see Parfit 1984: 453–454 and Bostrom 2014. See also Ord 2020.

³⁸ For a representative discussion on comparing existential risks to other cause areas from an effective altruist perspective, see MacAskill 2018.

cannot solve these problems by directly trying to undo them, and have suggested that explaining this observation supports a holistic approach to the value of contributions. Finally, I have argued that if contribution pessimism is correct, this could have an important bearing on population ethics, and as a result, for the weight of our reasons to avoid human extinction.

While my arguments for contribution pessimism have not been conclusive, coming to grips with these issues would still be worthwhile. These issues challenge us to clarify our thinking about the importance of making a contribution, and about what kinds of contributions might remain available to us indefinitely. In short, contribution pessimism challenges us to picture more clearly what life could be like in a future worth fighting for.

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