Derek Parfit's objections to John Rawls

Some warnings: this is not an exhaustive list and is not in order of textual appearance; and the third objection has been lifted from another handout of mine.

Contractualism and population ethics. Parfit attributes to Rawls "The best moral principles are those it would be rational for us to choose as the principles to be followed in our society. To ensure impartiality, we ask what principles we should choose if we did not know particular facts about ourselves." (1984: 392) He objects that this method is unsuited to addressing certain problems of population ethics, such as whether we should prefer a world of 1000 very happy people or a million but each somewhat less happy. The method involves us assuming we exist in both situations, so applying it we will favour the former, but it aims for impartiality and impartiality actually requires that we don't know which situation we will exist in.

The reductionist defence. Act utilitarianism says that the morally right action is the one that produces most happiness. John Rawls objects that such utilitarianism ignores the boundaries between persons. He says that this is because it applies a method of reasoning which is rational for an individual to a whole society. It is rational for an individual to sometimes sacrifice a part of themselves for the good of the whole, e.g. remove a tooth. The members of society are likewise treated as forming a whole organism and some may be sacrificed for the happiness of the whole, a line of thought which Rawls thinks mistaken. Derek Parfit's response is that some utilitarians may ignore boundaries for a different reason: because they are reductionists. (1984: 331. It does not seem to me that it is reductionism that Parfit is after, but some view according to which the world we live in (a) can be adequately described without the concept of distinct persons *and* (b) a description featuring it is erroneous. I would define reductivism, in this context, as combining (a) with the claim that some "person-involving" description is correct.)

Parfit/John Broome's ethnic groups objections. There is some difficulty in attributing credit here. Anyway, suppose that in India, in 1800, we are choosing between three constitutions which give two groups equal amounts of other primary goods, but differ in terms of the wealth that results: on constitution (1), the Indians get 100 and the British do too; on constitution (2), the Indians get 120 and the British 110; and on constitution (3), the Indians get 115 and the British 140. Since the lowest anyone gets is 115 with constitution 3, which is higher than 110 and 100, the difference principle is meant to favour constitution 3. Parfit and Broome observe that it is mistaken to assume that the same individual could occupy the worst-off position in all systems, so that we can ask which they would prefer, for in (2) it is a British and in (3) an Indian. Various arguments of Rawls assume this, says Broome, though not his main one. Once we abandon the assumption, Broome and Parfit think, we must compare the interests of the different groups in a utilitarian way, contrary to Rawls's intentions. And if there are many more Indians than British, Parfit and Broome find it unlikely that (3) is better.

Average utilitarianism and equal chances. If we imagine self-interested individuals who do not know various facts about themselves, such as race and wealth levels, choosing from Rawls's menu of principles, it is rational for them to choose average utilitarianism: more fully, it is rational given the assumption that there is an equal chance of them (their?) being anyone in the society. Average utilitarianism aims for the average happiness level to be as high as possible. But

Rawls rejects that assumption in favour of the assumption that they have no knowledge of the probability of which person they are, e.g. the probability of being the least happy. Parfit thinks Rawls's choice of assumption is not defensible (2011: 350-351). It does not improve impartiality over the equal chance assumption. Regarding the defence "We start with their knowing no information, then add just enough to make a choice possible," Parfit argues that Rawls does not consistently apply this and that we should actually start with true beliefs, removing those which are a potential problem.

References
Edward, T.R. 2022. Objections to John Rawls's difference principle. Available at *academia.edu*
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Parfit, D. 2011. *On What Matters, Volume One.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.