

HISTORY AND PERSONS

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Abstract. The non-identity problem is usually considered in the forward-looking direction but a version of it also applies to the past, due to the fact that even minor historical changes would have affected the whole subsequent sequence of births, dramatically changing who comes to exist next. This simple point is routinely overlooked by familiar attitudes and evaluative judgments about the past, even those of sophisticated historians. I shall argue, however, that it means that when we feel sadness about some historical tragedy, or think of one possible course of history as better than another, these judgments and attitudes can be understood in terms of two opposing perspectives on the past: an impersonal standpoint concerned only with how much value each course of history contains, and a person-centred standpoint concerned with harms and benefits to the people who had actually existed. In this paper, I will set out these radically different visions of what matters in history and point out some of their surprising implications.

The past is what it is. We can fantasize about time travel, but we cannot change the past. What has been done cannot be undone. But this does not mean that the past does not matter. The past matters because it contains a great deal that matters. There will be suffering, there is suffering, there was suffering: this temporal movement cannot erase the badness of pain. It can only change how it matters.

Since past suffering cannot be undone, it cannot matter as future suffering matters, as something we ought to try to prevent. The past isn't a sphere for action but an object for attitudes, a focus for thoughts and feelings. Past suffering matters as something we ought to know and care about.

I shall be concerned here with how a version of what Parfit called the non-identity problem affects our attitudes and judgments about the past.¹ The non-identity problem was perhaps first mentioned by Leibniz in a passage to which Adams has drawn our attention in one of the earliest contemporary discussions of the problem.² But although Leibniz and Adams were concerned with our attitudes to the past, the voluminous literature on non-identity has focused almost entirely on how our acts affect the identities of future persons.³ The past is neglected, as if it doesn't matter.

I shall begin by briefly considering how the non-identity problem, applied to the past, generates a disturbing challenge to the way we think about ourselves. Here I will be reprising a form of argument put forward by Adams, and, more recently and most powerfully, by Smilansky.⁴ I will argue, however, that this is merely an instance of a more general problem, a problem that has nothing to do with us. The non-identity problem infects history itself: it also affects impartial attitudes to past tragedies, and even value judgments about familiar historical events, in ways we routinely overlook. This is due to the fact that even minor historical changes would have affected the

¹ Parfit, 1984.

² Leibniz, 1967; Adams, 1979; see also Adams, 2006 and Hasker, 1981.

³ An exception is discussion of reparations for historical injustice (see Sher, 1981; Waldron 1992). But that discussion is concerned only with how past crimes bear on current action, not with how we should relate to these crimes themselves. And questions about reparations or apology are irrelevant to most past evil. Another exception is work on backward-looking attitudes to the conception of disabled children. See especially Wallace, 2013.

⁴ Smilansky, 2013.

whole subsequent sequence of births, dramatically changing who comes to exist next. And that means that when we ask whether we should regret some past tragedy, or whether history would have been better if things had taken a different turn, these and other familiar questions about history will receive very different answers depending on whether we adopt an impersonal or a person-centred perspective on the past. In what follows, I'll set out these opposing visions of what matters in history and point out some of their surprising implications.

I.

Birthdays and Cenotaphs

The past no doubt contains moments that inspire our approval and admiration. But on the whole, human history is depressingly dark. Even the preposterously optimistic Hegel described history as a 'slaughter bench', and a 'panorama of suffering and sin'.⁵ And Hegel was writing before the butchery in the Congo, the trenches, the extermination camps, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Gulags, the killing fields, and all the rest... Not that Hegel was exaggerating. Looking back, he would have found the pillaging of the New World, slavery, both ancient and modern, the European wars of religion, the Mongol conquests, the Black Death, and the grim list could go on and on.

These horrors sadden and appal us. They fill us with regret. We wish things had been different: we can't help but think of what might have been—of how better things *would* have been—if, say, Hitler wasn't rejected by the Viennese Academy of Arts, or if the Archduke ducked the bullet in June 1914.

By contrast, our attitude to our own lives is rather more positive. Most of us are glad, of course, that *given* that we do exist, things have so far gone reasonably well. But our gladness can go further than that. Many of us are also glad that we came to exist in the first place. And even those who wish they weren't born still (we may hope) care about some others. They are at least glad about the existence of these other persons that they love or care about.

We rarely connect these two starkly contrasting attitudes—the tears on Holocaust day, the cheers on our birthday. But Adams and Smilansky argue that they are in tension.⁶

The tension is generated by some unremarkable facts about the conditions for our existence. That we exist isn't merely contingent, but a matter of great luck: an undistinguished sperm had to win a race against millions of competitors, and that seminal victory was itself made possible by the timing and nature of a banal sex act... If another sperm had won the race, if our parents had done the deed hours, or days, or weeks earlier, then we wouldn't have been born. Moving further back from the conjugal scene, it's obvious that we wouldn't have been born if our parents hadn't met, or if *their* parents hadn't met, or *their* parents...

Many things can affect whether two people meet, and whether and when they engage in intercourse. An electric outage, a strike, the weather... Even more obviously: the outbreak of a revolution, war, or epidemic. In this way, grand historical events have a direct effect on who comes to exist next, and thus on who come to exist later. If some past tragedy were averted, this would mean that different couples would

⁵ Hegel, 1861, III.

⁶ Adams, 1979; 2006, and Smilansky, 2013. Wallace, 2013 discusses a structurally similar tension.

meet and fall in love, and therefore that different people would be born, which would in turn affect the whole sequence of births. Subsequent history, all the way to the present, would be populated with different people. And we wouldn't have been born.

If the Holocaust hadn't occurred, it's almost certain that I wouldn't have come to exist. Many more people wouldn't have come to exist if the First World War was somehow averted. Almost no one who exists today would still exist if, say, Constantine hadn't converted to Christianity.

To put things bluntly, *most ways in which history could have been better would also mean that most or all of us would never come to exist.*

This is why our regret about past horrors, and our gladness that we and others exist, seem to be in tension. When we are glad about something, we are glad that things turned out that way. We prefer the actual world, where we have come to exist, to an alternative in which we hadn't. When we are sad about and regret something, we wish that things had been different. We wish that the Holocaust hadn't happened, that things *didn't* turn out that way. But it wasn't realistically possible for WWII and the Holocaust not to have happened yet for many of us, and those we love, to nevertheless come to exist.⁷

It makes little sense to be all-things-considered glad that one thing exists while at the same time being all-things-considered sad about, and regretting, the occurrence of another thing, if we know that the latter also happens to be the realistic necessary causal condition for existence of the former. This is because these contrasting all-things-considered attitudes involve, or otherwise commit us to, categorical preferences about incompatible (realistically speaking) courses of events. And we cannot, all things considered, categorically want something both to have occurred and not to have occurred.⁸

Now as a matter of fantasy, it is admittedly conceptually possible that the Holocaust wouldn't have occurred yet we still would have been conceived. But as several authors have pointed out, attitudes like gladness, sadness, and regret operate under a constraint of realism.⁹ Our regret about the Holocaust can naturally lead us to regret, for example, that Hitler survived the numerous assassination attempts on his life. But it would be bizarre to be full of regret that the Allies hadn't kidnapped Hitler

⁷ Here's how I'll understand the relation between sadness, regret and preference. When we are saddened by a tragedy, this is normally associated with *regretting* its occurrence—with being *pained* by the fact that things had gone this way rather than another. We are pained in this way because we deeply *wish* or prefer that things had gone differently but, because the past cannot be unmade, this preference cannot be satisfied. That's the core case. There are other cases where we regard a tragedy as a necessary evil: we overall approve its occurrence because it was necessary for some greater good. This approval may be reluctant and tinged with sadness, and we may even describe the event as *regrettable*—that is to say, we *would* have regretted it if not for the extenuating circumstances. Here, however, sadness and regret wouldn't be our all-things-considered response to the tragedy.

⁸ This isn't to deny that we can be conflicted or ambivalent about things, so long as this falls short of holding conflicting *categorical* preferences. With respect to very many things, we admittedly never take such an overall stance. But such agnosticism is not an option when it comes to horrors like the Holocaust.

⁹ Smilansky, 2013, p. 3; Wallace, 2013, 72ff (historical thinkers similarly distinguish genuinely relevant counterfactuals from mere fanciful thinking. See Berlin, 1954/2008; Ferguson, 2000, p. 83). Hurka (2000, p. 118) also points out that fantastic possibilities are outside the scope of regret. But he explains this in terms of distance from the actual world, which he takes to imply that as events recede further into the past, they are no longer fit objects for regret. The question of whether backward-looking discounting can be justified is beyond the scope of this paper but I think it is distinct from the issue of realism. Hurka's view seems to imply that regretting that the Archduke didn't duck the bullet in 1914—a realistic possibility at the time—is akin to regretting that something utterly fantastic didn't happen five minutes ago. But this seems false.

and replaced him by Charlie Chaplin who, pretending to be Hitler, went on to end the war. Such an attitude would be a childish flight of fancy—a kind of *wishful wishing*—rather than a serious sentiment about the past. We may prefer such fantasies to the horrific reality in the thin sense of judging that they describe better alternatives. But they are just too preposterously improbable to be fitting objects of our sentiment and concern.¹⁰ I'll therefore consider, in what follows, only attitudes to the past that pay heed to this reality principle.

So it seems we have to decide what we *really* prefer: an alternative course of history where the Holocaust had been averted, yet we never came to exist, or the actual course of events where the Holocaust happened as it did, followed by our arrival on the scene. But it makes no sense to prefer both, all things considered. We can't have (couldn't have had) both. We need to choose.

Adams and Smilansky present this choice as an agonizing existential dilemma—a dilemma to which they end up giving opposing answers. But I at least don't find this a particularly difficult choice.

The first option is to choose us: to hold on to our gladness that we exist, and give up our regret about past tragedies. On this view, when we look back at the long list of historical calamities—when we look back at horrific wars in which millions have died, at genocide, slavery and all the rest—we needn't, deep down, wish that they hadn't occurred. We must treat them as a peculiar kind of necessary evil—necessary not because they were the only route to some greater good, but because they were the only route to unremarkable *us*. Such an attitude to the past seems to me not only monstrous, but also preposterous. It's almost as if we are seeing the whole of history as a long, slow march leading to our birth, and all these horrors merely as collateral damage incurred along the way.

When we reflect on past horrors like the Holocaust, we can feel at loss. Our feeble sadness and regret seem woefully inadequate. But feeble as they may be, these are not attitudes we can give up or qualify on such selfish grounds.¹¹

By contrast, our gladness that we and others have come to exist doesn't seem so non-negotiable. To begin with, this is a rather refined attitude. It's hard to say how many of us actually feel such gladness about our conception and birth—and at least some seem to manage well without it. Then there is the worry that such gladness about our existence might make no sense. To be glad that we exist seems to assume that we have benefitted from coming into existence. Yet this seems to imply that we would have been worse off if we hadn't come to exist which, in turn, seems to absurdly imply that the vast multitude of possible people who never came to exist are thereby being harmed. And if we don't even feel such gladness, or if such gladness makes no sense, then there is no existential tension.

I do feel such gladness, at least about some other people, and I don't share the worry about its coherence. But I still find this existential tension easy to dispel. It seems to me clear that we must continue to regret the Holocaust, and other past tragedies, and wish that they never happened, even if that also means wishing ourselves away.¹² We can still be glad that we came to exist. But, on reflection, we

¹⁰ I will assume an intuitive sense of when an historical alternative is sufficiently probable to count as realistic—as *historically* rather than merely conceptually possible.

¹¹ Such a choice wouldn't be as unpleasant if we shift the focus to the existence of our loved ones—but it would still be perfectly preposterous. Things are admittedly less straightforward if we consider not just our personal standpoint, but the collective standpoints of all the billions of persons presently alive. I will return to this issue later in the paper.

¹² This is also the conclusion that Smilansky, 2013 ends up endorsing.

can qualify this gladness, and see it as merely conditional.¹³ *Given* that all that horror has occurred, that this is how things had sadly turned out, we can still be glad that some further series of accidents then led to us being born. Such an attitude is perfectly consistent with unqualified regret about the horrors of the past.

II.

Going Further Back in Time

When we look back at a past horror like the Holocaust, it seems clear that we should wish it away, that we should prefer a history in which this atrocity was avoided, even if that means that we and our loved ones wouldn't even come to exist.

But once we have started down this path, it seems we can't really stop.¹⁴

Even if we held that only great tragedies can, from our personal standpoint, overturn our gladness that we exist, the list of historical horrors that will outweigh our existence will still be long—slavery, genocide and just plain war, plagues and other natural catastrophes, and on and on. This list goes much further back in time than WWII. And if any of these earlier horrors had been averted, this would even more clearly mean that we wouldn't come to exist. So again, if we have to choose between a world in these earlier atrocities occur, and in which we exist, and a world in which they don't, and we don't, we should choose the latter.

There are very many past tragedies we should wish away, even if that means none of us would come to exist. Notice, however, that many of these attitudes to past tragedies themselves seem to be in tension. We may believe that if the Archduke's car hadn't taken a wrong turn in Sarajevo, no one would have had to die in the trenches. We may therefore wish that the Archduke's car had taken a different path, and his assassination was prevented. We should wish, by contrast, that one of the many assassination attempts on Hitler's life *had* been successful. And we should similarly wish that the Black Plague had been averted, and so forth. But these wishes couldn't all be realized in the same course of history. If the Archduke had survived, it's very unlikely that Hitler would have become the Führer. If the Black Plague had been averted, there almost certainly wouldn't have been a Habsburg Dynasty, let alone a misguided visit to Sarajevo; conversely, for Franz Ferdinand to return alive from Sarajevo, there *had* to have been the Black Plague, and many other tragedies in between.

So we need to weigh these alternative histories, not only against the actual one in which we come to exist, but also against each other. How should we rank them, and which course of history should we prefer? It might seem obvious that we should prefer those alternative histories that are better: histories that contain more good, or at least less evil. And if we follow this simple logic then, in most cases, we should give priority to earlier tragedies over later ones. Not, of course, because earlier historical tragedies were worse than more recent ones. But we are considering now whole courses of history rather than discrete events. And as we've just seen, there is a sense

¹³ See Wallace, 2013 for the distinction between conditional attitudes and what he calls 'all-in' regret and affirmation. Both Adams and Wallace defend further claims that would make qualifying this gladness more difficult. Wallace holds that we cannot help but unconditionally affirm our lives and the projects and attachments that give them meaning. Nietzsche may weep, but I'm afraid that I don't affirm my life in this way. Adams holds that genuine love requires unconditional gladness that one's beloved exists (Adams, 2006, p. 246). But, again, I don't see why this must be so.

¹⁴ This section develops the argument that, I assume, underlies brief remarks in this direction in Smilansky, 2013, p. 10 and Adams, 2006, p. 251.

in which the prevention of earlier tragedies will very often also mean that later tragedies will also be prevented: without the Black Plague there would be no WWI, and without WWI, there would be no Holocaust. Thus, although there's no realistic course of history in which both the Black Plague is prevented *and* Hitler gets assassinated, there surely *is* a realistic course of history in which both the Black Plague and the Holocaust never happen. Our wishes that these various past tragedies hadn't occurred *can* be jointly fulfilled. In this way, earlier improvements can also often 'contain' later improvements.

Now this won't yet mean that alternative histories that branch in a better direction earlier on are also better overall. After all, the tragedies of actual history might be replaced by even worse ones: say, a horrific world war between other state actors. So for the alternative histories we wish for to be overall better, we also need to assume that this isn't the case. But this is something we can plausibly assume, at least with respect to the prevention of *some* earlier tragedies. We're still operating under a constraint of realism. So we cannot assume that these alternative histories would have been rosy utopian. They would have still contained conflict, injustice, and disease. But it still seems plausible that there will often enough be some realistic alternatives that are overall better both from actual history and from alternatives that improve on actual history only at later junctures—better not just at the point of initial divergence, but when the entire counterfactual branch line is taken into account. And that's all we need.

Notice that we aren't assuming here that such better courses of events *must* follow, or are even *most likely* to follow, the earlier historical improvement we now focus on. Different realistic alternatives will be more or less probable, but we are here in the business of singling out some realistic possibilities as better than, and preferable to, others, not of predicting the most likely one.

So it seems that when we look back at history, we should often give priority to earlier improvements over later ones. And therefore, when we ask which alternative history we should overall prefer—and what we should regret the most, and unconditionally—this line of reasoning takes us further and further back in history...

There is however a catch. In these alternative histories, where history takes a different course at an earlier point, it's not only our own existence that will be ruled out, but also that of numerous past people, *including the victims of most later tragedies*.

If the Black Plague had been prevented, this would have almost certainly meant that almost no person alive today would have existed. But it would also mean that no one who suffered and died in WWII and the Holocaust would have been born either. It would mean that almost no one who had been born after 1353 would have come to exist. And as we roll back history even further back, more and more actual people will be 'erased' from the alternative history that we favour.

Adams on Wishing Away Past Evil

Adams finds this result unacceptable. He writes:

"... we can... ask for whose sake we should regret the First World War. Chiefly for the sake of all the individuals who suffered from it, I should think. If personal substances are the most important objects of love, as I believe, regret over a merely abstract badness of the events of a war would not provide enough reason to wish away the existence of all or most of the individual human persons we know well and love. Arguably, however, it makes little sense to wish away our own existence for the sake of the victims of the First World War if, at the same time, we are wishing away their existence as part of our all-

things considered regret about even older catastrophes that were necessary conditions of their being born. Once we start wishing away evils and everything that depends on them, where do we stop?”¹⁵

Adams makes three claims in this dense passage. The first is that we regret past tragedies *for the sake* of the individuals who suffered in them. The second is that merely abstract badness cannot outweigh our gladness at our existence, and that of our loved ones. The third is that if we start wishing away past evils, it’s hard to see where this would stop.

On its own, the last worry has little force. As Smilansky notes, it’s not as if we face a regress: history is finite, and even if evil goes a long way back, it must start somewhere.¹⁶ And as we saw, we only have reason to wish away earlier tragedies if the alternative not only also ‘contains’ the prevention of later tragedies, but is also better on the whole. Without this assumption, we would have no reason to prefer, all things considered, the prevention of earlier tragedies to later ones. But once this assumption is on board, then, at least on the face of it, it seems that shifting to prefer an alternative history where fewer tragedies occur, and which is thus *even* better, should be a clear advantage, not a problem.

What is supposed to defuse this advantage is the nature of the value that is contained in that better alternative. With each past evil we remove from our alternative history, we also remove the later people who had existed only because that evil had occurred, including the victims of later evils.

It’s somewhat misleading to describe the betterness of such an alternative history as merely abstract. It’s not as if the only difference between this history and ours is that ours contains the abstract badness of injustice or crimes against humanity, and the alternative doesn’t. The difference is that in actual history there is the suffering of many millions, while in that alternative there isn’t. It’s just that those who had suffered here would no longer be there. *They* would not have benefitted from that improvement, it wouldn’t have been better *for* them.

It would therefore be better to say, not that this alternative history is only better in some abstract sense, but that it’s only *impersonally* better—much better, yet not better *for* anyone.

Adams’s final point was that we care about past tragedies primarily for the sake of those who suffered from them. This, I believe, is the important point in that passage. What generates the discomfort about this radical rewinding of history all the way to the beginning is that it’s driven by a purely impersonal logic and thereby fails to capture the way our sadness and regret about past tragedies are focused on the plight of the *particular persons* who had actually existed. We wish not merely that the past had been better, or that it didn’t contain these horrors, but that things had been better *for* these victims—that *their* lives didn’t contain these horrors.

Two Perspectives on the Past

What these reflections bring out is that there are two distinct perspectives we can take on history: we can care about history in a purely *impersonal* way, simply wishing things had been as good as they could have realistically been. Or our perspective can be *person-centred*: focused on the people who had actually existed and on ways in which things could have been better for *them*.¹⁷ Whenever historians ask whether

¹⁵ Adams, 2006, p. 251.

¹⁶ Smilansky, 2013, p. 10.

¹⁷ I adapt this distinction from Parfit, 1984.

things could have taken a better turn—whether Chamberlain should have taken a firmer stance against Hitler, or whether, as some have argued, it would have been better if Britain had stayed out of WWI¹⁸—they are asking questions that must be answered differently, and which will often receive different answers, depending on which perspective we adopt.

These two perspectives will rank possible courses of history differently, often deliver opposing verdicts on various historical events and possibilities, and, consequently, support utterly different sets of evaluations, preferences, and sentiments concerning the past. Both of these perspectives are impartial, and the tension between them arises quite independently of our personal perspective, and the existential tension it generates when set against an impartial view of history.

In what follows, I will argue that Adams is right in claiming that the impersonal perspective fails to capture our core attitudes to the past. It also has multiple implausible implications. I'll therefore turn to develop a person-centred alternative. But even the person-centred perspective has surprising implications. And I will argue that although the person-centred perspective has primacy, it nevertheless needs to be tempered by impersonal considerations.

III.

The Impersonal Perspective on the Past

The impersonal perspective ranks possible courses of history in terms of the value they contain overall, regardless of who exists in them. It tells us to prefer, out of the realistically possible courses of history, those that contain overall more total well-being, and to prefer most, and unconditionally, the realistic course of history that would have contained the most total well-being.¹⁹ And our sentiments should reflect this ranking: we should feel most regret about those turns of events that prevented the impersonally best alternative and care less about those in which less was at stake, impersonally speaking.²⁰

The impersonal perspective shouldn't be confused with utilitarianism. From the impersonal perspective, we impartially care about the past for its own sake, so to speak, not because such caring would itself make the world overall better. And while the impersonal perspective tells us to prefer that things had gone better, and best, this is obviously not an outcome we ought to try to bring about since we cannot change the past. The impersonal perspective, however, is structurally similar to utilitarianism and, as we shall see, vulnerable to parallel worries.²¹

¹⁸ Ferguson, 1999. Ferguson holds that “had Britain stood aside even for a matter of weeks continental Europe could therefore have been transformed into something not wholly unlike the European Union we know today but without the massive contraction in British overseas power entailed by the fighting of the two world wars” (p. 459), not to mention the immense loss of lives. This is why he thinks the Great War was “the greatest error of modern history” (p. 462).

¹⁹ I will focus on well-being. But the view can have a more expansive axiology, and also give weight, for example, to fairness, desert, and the like.

²⁰ An alternative way of developing the impersonal perspective would tell us to prefer world histories that contain the highest *average* level of well-being. But such a view ignores differences in population size when it surely matters *how many* people had suffered in some tragedy. And the average view is anyway implausible for familiar reasons. It tells us to prefer histories containing a handful of happy persons over alternatives containing millions that are just slightly less happy, and to prefer histories in which millions are subjected to awful torture over histories in which a single person is subjected to somewhat worse torture.

²¹ Some deny the very intelligibility of impersonal betterness—which would mean the impersonal perspective won't even get off the ground. I'll ignore such worries here.

The impersonal view is attractively simple. And it's natural to think that we should prefer what's better, and that we should overall prefer the best. As we saw, however, such a view pushes us to wish for historical improvements that go ever further back in time. And with every such step back, more and more of the past people who had actually existed must be wished away including, most troublingly, the victims of most of the horrors that were the initial focus of our regret about the past. How many past people must be erased in this way depends on our answer to Adams's earlier question: how far back would we need to go, if we adopted such an impersonal perspective?

History Without a Human Face

If we should wish that things had gone as impersonally best as they could realistically have, then I think our wishes must be directed to the very beginning. Things couldn't have realistically been perfect, whatever that means. But surely they could have been better in numerous ways, all the way back. Things certainly needn't have been *as bad* as they had been: history is littered with grave mistakes, wrongdoing, murder... And these go all the way back, even if there were no Adam and Eve or Cain and Abel.

So from this impersonal perspective, we must wish for changes all the way to the beginning of history. Which is also to say that we should wish for an alternative history that contains pretty much *none* of the people who had actually existed. Such a history would be impersonally better because it contains numerous lives that are better than the lives of the people who actually existed. But these other lives are the lives of faceless strangers, of merely possible people—actually, not even people who might exist, but people who *could* have existed but never will.

But, on reflection, it's hard to see why we should stop there. Human history starts just over three thousand years ago, but humans have been around for at least two hundred thousand years. This long period no doubt contained much unrecorded barbarity: Stone Age massacres, torture, rape, cannibalism... It's unrealistic to think that it was possible to entirely avoid such barbarity, but it's enough if some of it could have been prevented; and any such early improvement is almost certain to lead to dramatic changes later on.

These prehistoric barbarities, despite occurring over vast periods, still admittedly involved very small numbers of victims. But we can go further back in time. Even if animal suffering counts for less than human suffering, there was just *so much* suffering over many millions of years of evolution. That suffering adds up to a truly vast amount of evil. (Natural *selection* is a euphemism.)

Some believe that the evolution of sentient and intelligent life forms somewhere in the universe was inevitable. But even if the evolution of life on Earth was merely an accident, it still seems that in our naturalist universe there was no realistic alternative path to sentience and rationality, and thus to much (or all) that possesses value. For this reason, although the cruel process of evolution is associated with a vast amount of suffering over millions of years, we cannot, I believe, wish all that suffering away. We must accept it as a necessary evil.

But this isn't to say that we must endorse the evolutionary process exactly as it had actually occurred. Perhaps, if an asteroid's course had been slightly different, it would have narrowly missed the Earth, much to the relief of the dinosaurs. And there are numerous other ways in which things could have gone better early on. But as Stephen J. Gould writes, '[w]ind back the film of life and play it again. The history of

evolution will be totally different.²² It's likely that if evolution had taken a different earlier course, *homo sapience* would never have arrived on the scene. And there's the further point that it's surely conceivable, and was probably realistically possible, that a different, non-human form of intelligent life had evolved, one that is less selfish, and less aggressive.

In other words, the impersonal perspective, taken to its logical conclusion, seems to imply that *we should also wish humanity itself away*. We started with regret about tragedies like slavery and the Holocaust (a mere sixty years ago) and ended up quite far...

From the impersonal perspective, humanity itself is expendable and replaceable. I said above that the individuals who would have populated that impersonally best alternative history are faceless. But we can now see that they wouldn't even have a human face.

Wishing the Best

Although it is natural to think that we should wish that things had gone as best as they could have, such a preference becomes less obvious if what counts as best *won't be better for anyone*. This is because, as we just saw, on the impersonal perspective, the course of history we should most prefer is also one that contains none of the people who had actually lived. Everyone would be erased. So no one could benefit from this rewriting of history.

For obvious epistemic reasons, the alternative history that will replace all that is entirely opaque to us. We are replacing actual history with a better one that is, for us, nevertheless a complete blank. But we know enough to know that this alternative history would be profoundly alien. And if we must wish humanity itself away then that alternative history would literally be populated by (terrestrial) aliens.

Could it really be true that when we reflect on the past, we must wish everyone and everything away? And for *this*—an alien alternative Earth that wouldn't have been better for anyone?

Such an attitude seems to me far from mandatory. In fact I think it would be plain wrong: it involves a failure to appropriately respond to what matters most about the past. To begin to see why, we need to further develop Adams's worry about wishing away the victims of past tragedies.

What Matters To Us Most About the Past

Adams's most important point, I said, was that we care about past tragedies *for the sake* of those who suffered from them. I think that's exactly right. When we attempt to confront the horror of Auschwitz or chattel slavery, we may whisper to ourselves, 'This should never have happened'. This thought can be understood in impersonal terms: we feel that such horrors are a blot on humanity, a stain that cannot be erased. But what shocks and horrifies us most is that *these* individuals—and so many of them—were subjected to such evil. The list of names on the memorial wall may be too long to us to fully grasp, but it's still a list of *names*, a list of concrete individual victims. When we reflect back on past tragedies, it's on these victims that our attention, and compassion, primarily focus. What we wish is for their sake. We feel not just that *this* should never have happened, but that it should never have happened to *them*, that *their* lives shouldn't have been blighted in this way.

²² Gould, 1989.

In other words, our core attitudes about past tragedies, and about the past in general, are *person-centred* in character: they involve, I believe, ineliminable reference to, and preference for, counterfactual histories where the lives of the victims had gone better, untouched by that horror.

As we saw, however, on the impersonal perspective our wishes about the past must encompass historical tragedies that go further and further back, and it's not only a long list of tragedies that we are 'erasing', but also all of the people who had ever lived. So we aren't envisaging a history where these victims go on to live the lives they would have lived if that evil were removed. We are envisaging a history from which they are absent.

I said earlier that there is a sense in which later historical 'improvements' can be contained in earlier ones: preventing the Black Plague would also prevent WWII. In this way, our wish that WWII hadn't occurred could also be satisfied in an alternative history that satisfies our wish that the Black Plague hadn't occurred. In fact, in a twisted way, such an alternative history would even satisfy our (negative) wish that the victims of the Holocaust hadn't suffered as they did. But what such earlier 'improvements' cannot satisfy is our deeper, person-centred (positive) wish that these victims hadn't suffered *by* living lives not blighted by such evil. When we wish all past people away like this, we are subverting rather than expressing our deepest attitudes to the past.

We started with our sadness and regret about past tragedies. And, propelled backwards by the logic of preferring courses of history that contain least evil, it seemed as if such regret must extend all the way back, as if it commits us to rolling back history to the very beginning. But we can now see that this isn't merely an innocent extension of our deepest attitudes to the past. Our current sadness and regret is focused on past persons and ways in which things could have been better for them—on distinctions that mean nothing from an impersonal standpoint.²³ On the impersonal perspective, such attitudes need to be replaced with impersonal regret, regret that focuses on the evil that had occurred, not on its victims. We would be wishing for an alternative history that isn't better for these victims, and we cannot pretend to wish these historical improvements for *their* sake, or that our wishes express any kind of compassion *for* them. *As individuals*, they don't seem to matter at all. We may be sorry that they suffered so much—or rather, sorry that there was so much avoidable suffering. But strictly speaking, these victims shouldn't have been there in the first place.

There is something deeply alienating about the impersonal perspective—its demands are distant and disconnected from our actual concerns. It alienates us from the things that now most matter to us about the past, and from some of our deepest feelings and sentiments. After all, the impersonal perspective instructs us to care the most about alternative histories we had never thought of, that mean nothing to us now, and that, I believe, we will struggle to care much about. And it instructs us to dramatically demote, or even reject, the sentiments we actually do have, and to shift our concern away from the objects of our actual attitudes to the past.

²³ The impersonal perspective also doesn't have much use for other notions central to our thinking about the past. Harm is usually understood in counterfactual terms: something causes us harm when it makes us worse than we would have otherwise been. The badness of death for a person—and thus much of the evil of murder—is also usually understood in such terms: death deprives a person of the goods she would have had in a longer life. Understood in this way, harm and the badness of death are person-centred notions—essentially involving comparisons between stretches of actual lives and small-scale alternative histories where things go better for these persons.

This is a demand on our emotional lives that we should reject. While recognising the wonderful impersonal betterness of that alternative history with neither humans nor bloodshed, we needn't, I believe, care about it or prefer it to alternative histories where things do go better for the human beings who had actually suffered, even if these are impersonally inferior.

Receptacles for Value

The problem with a purely impersonal standpoint—to borrow from a familiar worry about utilitarianism—is that it regards persons merely as dispensable receptacles for value. From that perspective, it doesn't matter who exactly exists. Without hesitation, we should wish away, and erase from history, anyone who could be replaced by an anonymous better alternative. We are all merely extras in a drama whose real subject matter is the fluctuation of accumulated overall value...

To me this seems awry, and even more so when applied to the victims of past atrocities. Wishing them away in this manner is obscene—as if we are replacing a broken receptacle with a brand new one. Evil is removed by erasing its victims. It's like using a guillotine to stop a headache.

Now when people object that utilitarianism regards people as mere receptacles for value, the worry usually relates to cases where utilitarians regard trade-offs between individuals as no different in kind from trade-offs within a single individual's life: it's just fine if a suffering individual dies so long as she is replaced by someone else who is happier. But when we wish that history had gone differently, we are of course not literally replacing suffering individuals with happy ones; we're not doing anything—we are envisaging, and preferring, a counterfactual history where the suffering individuals never even come to exist. However, if it's wrong to replace individuals in such trade-offs then there is also, I believe, something to be said against *wishing* that individuals were replaced (whether by accident or design) by happier ones, just because this will lead to greater overall utility, impersonally speaking. And it seems to me awry, for broadly similar reasons, to wish that some person hadn't been born and someone happier had been born instead.²⁴ Such attitudes express an outlook in which persons don't really matter *qua* distinct persons. The same point, I believe, applies not only to the living but also to the departed.

Caring About Past People While Still Wishing Them Away?

It might be surprising that we need to wish humanity itself away but it might be objected that most of us don't have terribly sophisticated views about which possible world history we should most prefer. When we consider this *recherché* question, we may conclude that it would be best to roll back history to the beginning, but why should that stop us from continuing to care as before about all the suffering in actual history? These attitudes should now be conditional: given that humanity *did* evolve, and history unfolded as it did till, say, 1914, we can still prefer that WWI, and all that suffering, were prevented. That was how we resolved the existential tension—why not apply the same solution here?

This objection misunderstands the scope of the impersonal perspective, and the extent to which it clashes with our current attitudes to the past. The impersonal perspective isn't concerned only with our preferences about the best history. It *also* tells us what *conditional* preferences we should have about the past. Zooming in on a

²⁴ Think of the attitude conveyed by telling someone 'I wish you had never been born'. It does not help much to add, 'because someone else would have been born instead, and had a better life.'

specific point in history, we ask which of the forking paths proceeding onwards would be best from an impersonal standpoint: *given* that history had proceeded as it actually did till that point, what would be the impersonally best continuation?

Even when the impersonal perspective answers such questions in the way we think they should be answered—so that, for example, the impersonally best continuation of August 1914 is indeed one where the Archduke survives and WWI is averted—the conditional preferences that follow would be very different in focus from the person-centred preferences that underlie our current sadness about WWI. Even when the impersonal perspective tells us to wish that WWI had been averted, this isn't for the sake of WWI's millions of victims, but because of a superiority in impersonal value, a superiority that is largely decided by the quality of the lives of the billions of merely possible people who would have replaced actual people for the rest of the 20th century and onward.

Such impersonal preferences at least overlap with our person-centred attitudes. But the two will often enough come apart. The impersonally superior courses of history won't always be better *even* for the people who had existed *at* the point of the wished for historical improvement.

While alternative histories without mass suffering and early death would obviously be impersonally better considered in themselves, it's far from obvious that they would always be the best historical 'improvements' even when we consider alternative histories that branch out at some specific historical point. After all, an impersonally superior alternative continuation of some point of history might involve things being *even worse* locally if that leads to greater good later down the line—leading to good that, remember, isn't better for anyone.

For example—and this is just an illustration, not a serious conjecture—imagine a history in which the Nazis fare better in the Eastern front, and WWII goes on for longer, meaning that millions more die, but also that the Soviet Union collapses and the eventual defeat of the Axis powers leads to a more peaceful and prosperous era. That alternative may be, in the longer term, impersonally better than actual history. But it would also be even more horrific for most of the people who had actually lived through the war.

Since impersonal improvements at some historical juncture will erase most of the people who had existed past that point, these improvements obviously can't be better for these people. But they often won't even be better for the people who existed at this juncture. Thus, the histories we should prefer, on such a standpoint, will often enough be impersonally better without being better for *anyone*, and may even be *far worse* for many actual people.

Worse, to the extent that the impersonal perspective shapes what matters to us about the past, it will prescribe more than such bare preferences: it tells us to focus our attention and regret on the very distant past, not on nearby horrors. And even when our attention does turn to the more recent past, our sentiments will need to focus on those points of the actual past from which things could have branched out onto impersonally superior tracks. Such emotions will often be in direct conflict with our current attitudes to the past.

Repugnance and Prurience

From the impersonal perspective, all that matters is the total amount of value in the world. When the parallel utilitarian view is applied to choices about future people it leads to a familiar problem. It seems to recommend preferring a future where

numerous people live lives barely worth living over a future where a smaller number of people live supremely good lives.²⁵

The impersonal perspective can generate a similarly repugnant conclusion in the backward-looking direction. It suggests that we should prefer alternative histories in which a far greater number of people come to exist, and, put together, add up to a greater total value, even if the lives of these additional people would have been just barely worth living. And this means that we should prefer some more populous alternative histories even if the lives of the people who would have lived in these alternatives would have been considerably worse than the lives of the people who had actually lived.²⁶ (I'm troubled by the absence of actual people from impersonally superior histories; the impersonal view tells us to lament the absence of hordes of possible people from *actual* history.)

We saw that on the impersonal perspective we will sometimes be required to wish that actual people had suffered more if that meant that the people who came to exist later would lead very good lives, making that alternative history impersonally better, overall, compared to actual history. When we combine these unpleasant wishes with the pull for larger populations, we get preferences that are doubly repugnant: cases where the impersonal standpoint tells us to prefer things to have been a lot worse for the people who existed at a given point in time, not because this would lead to a fantastic golden age, but because it would lead to a dramatic increase in population, even if these added people would have had lives that were only marginally good.

Finally, and even more oddly, the impersonal perspective's concern with population size impishly implies that we should develop a prurient interest in the procreative habits of past people—practices relating to sexuality, polygamy, contraception, abortion and the like take on surprising significance. Needless to say, this is very far from how we now think about the past.

Against Pure Impersonality

I have argued that the impersonal perspective fails to capture our core attitudes to the past and asks us to instead form attitudes that seem absurd, repugnant, and even prurient. It demands that we care, and even care *most*, about things to which we are, at best, indifferent while asking us to stop caring about, or greatly demote, those aspects of history that have so far most mattered to us. It tells us to most prefer an alternative history that is both alien and alienating—an alternative history from which everyone and everything from actual history will be erased, including humanity itself, and which wouldn't have been better for anyone. And it may tell us to favour, at various later historical junctures, counterfactuals which not only wouldn't have been better for the victims of great tragedies, but would have actually been even worse for them—again, merely for the sake of purely impersonal good.

I recognise that some will still find the impersonal standpoint attractive; but even they must admit that it is radically revisionary. And I suspect that what makes the impersonal perspective attractive will also ultimately lead to its rejection. Such a view will be most attractive to those who anyway favour a broadly impersonal, consequentialist view. But I suspect that many hard-nosed consequentialists will regard all this fretting about the past with incomprehension. They tend to think of the

²⁵ Parfit, 1984.

²⁶ There are of course various familiar attempts to block the repugnant conclusion and I don't mean to deny that that if any of these is successful it could also be marshalled here.

past in purely instrumental terms, leaving no space for the kind of intrinsic concern about the past assumed by the impersonal standpoint.²⁷ So I suspect that the impersonal perspective will be rejected even by many who are unmoved by my arguments. Conversely, if you aren't already attracted to a thoroughly impersonal view of ethics, why suddenly adopt it when you turn your gaze backwards?

IV.

The Person-Centred Perspective

The person-centred perspective is a perspective of concern for all the people who had actually existed or still exist—of concern for these persons for their own sake. It's a perspective from which one wishes that things had been better *for* them, and one is therefore saddened by, and regrets, realistically avoidable suffering and evil.

This basic idea can be developed in several ways. In its simplest form, the person-centred perspective would tell us to wish for the realistic world history in which actual people would have enjoyed the most *total* well-being. On such a view, we should prefer those realistic histories where things go better for the persons who had actually lived, and prefer most that history where things overall go as well for them as was realistically possible.

But this way of developing the person-centred approach has implausible implications and seems to me to still misrepresent how we think about the past. For example, it may tell us to wish that some actual people had undergone horrific suffering if that would have meant that many other actual people enjoyed somewhat nicer lives, leading to an overall better outcome. And it tells us to endorse great past evils in actual history if they were, in that history, the necessary historical conditions for the coming to existence of later people who led better lives, leading to an overall greater amount of person-centred value. It would therefore favour highly conservative attitudes to history that go counter to our solution to the existential tension. After all, it is not only you or me who would have been erased if WWII were prevented, but also most or all the seven billions people who currently exist, and very many others who were born after WWII. Since the vast majority of these lives are (or were) worth living and even nice enough, this adds up to a massive amount of person-centred value that would have been lost if WWII had been prevented—a loss that even the erasure of the horrific evil associated with that war is unlikely to outbalance. In fact, the accelerated rate of population growth in recent history probably means that on such a person-centred view the best history would be nearly identical to actual history—all the horrors of the past would be held fixed with things taking a better turn only at some point in the past few decades or even more recently. But even when we shift in this way from our personal standpoint to the massive collective viewpoint of all currently existing people (as well as of the recently deceased), holding fixed horrors such as the Holocaust just so that all of us would come to exist and lead our nice lives still seems to me deeply wrong, if less obviously so.²⁸

²⁷ My impression is that many uncompromising consequentialists would be puzzled by the idea that we should have a non-instrumental concern for the past—even if this concern is impersonal and 'maximizing' in character. But I don't mean to deny that consequentialism can in principle encompass such concern: it could be held, for example, that it's good to have fitting attitudes to past value (see Hurka, 2000).

²⁸ Notice, however, that the near overlap between the history most favoured by this form of the person-centred perspective and that favoured by our personal perspective is entirely contingent. If we looked back at the past from a point long after a catastrophe that decimated much of the human race,

When we look back, our attention is first drawn to the most horrific moments, and how they could have been avoided, not to ways in which things might have been even nicer—a priority reflected in my focus here on past tragedies as opposed to history’s more encouraging moments. We can capture this idea by understanding the person-centred view as giving much greater weight to the erasure of the evils undergone by history’s worst off than to the ways in which the well off could have led even better lives—as well as, importantly, than to the preservation of actual later good whose existence depends on earlier evil.

However, while it is hard to justify ‘holding’ significant past evil fixed just because it was a means to great later good (and therefore to overall greater person-centred value), I think we *can* justify holding past evil fixed if this enables a later historical turn that would have prevented a *much greater evil* to other actual people. After all, if it were always wrong to hold past evil fixed then it’s not as if we could instead favour histories in which the victims of past evil lead better lives. Rather we will be required to wish them all away—because we will be forced to most prefer the history that benefits the victims of the very earliest evil, however few, however small. But that was exactly one implication of the impersonal standpoint that we had hoped to avoid. And given that all that evil *had* actually occurred, why should we give priority to earlier victims over later ones simply because they had suffered first?

Wishing People Away—For Others’ Sake

I don’t pretend that this is more than a gesture towards a full-fledged person-centred theory.²⁹ What should be clear, however, is that any plausible understanding of the person-centred approach would need to allow some trade-offs. As we just saw, this means that there will be cases where we will have prefer histories in which some past evils are held fixed. It also means that we will have to wish away some actual past people. This seems to me unavoidable. Our resolution of the existential tension already involved a massive wishing away of people, and we anyway in effect wish away numerous existing persons whenever, say, we wish that a recent election had gone differently, or judge it would have been better if some policy had been enacted—around 131.4 million children are born worldwide every year, so even nearby improvements to the past would have ‘erased’ multitudes.

The alternative would be an absolutist deontological view on which proper respect for actual people means that we must never wish *anyone* away.³⁰ But such a view implies that we must endorse the miserable actual course of history and refrain from wishing for any historical change, however recent, or from regretting any past tragedy, however horrific. This still seems monstrous. We accept difficult trade-offs in many moral contexts and it’s hard to see why we shouldn’t accept them here.

From the person-centred perspective, wishing people away involves a loss. It isn’t something to be indifferent to, but it’s also unavoidable, given the distasteful causal arrangements we are stuck with, and the general nastiness of human history. Some have to ‘disappear’ if anyone is to be ‘saved’.

The important thing, though, is that we aren’t wishing anyone away for mere impersonal benefit. We are wishing some away for the sake of other actual persons—

the total version of the person-centred view would tell us to wish away all present people and instead favour historical improvements in the distant past, before that precipitous drop in population size.

²⁹ As I understand the view, it will need to incorporate a deontology of attitudes imposing constraints on permissible preferences. Developing such a view is beyond the scope of this paper. For first steps in this direction, see Foot, 2002, pp. 91-92.

³⁰ Smilansky considers such a view in unpublished work.

and in the central cases, because this would have meant things won't be so *horrific* for those others.³¹

Why Things Couldn't Have Been Much Better

We are appalled by so much of human history. There's so much that we regret, so many ways things could have gone better. I've argued that when we wish that things had gone better in this way, we are expressing person-centred attitudes. We care about the victims of tragedies such as the Black Plague or WWI, we wish that they had lived lives not blighted in this way.

There are numerous realistic alternative histories in which neither the Black Plague nor WWI had occurred. These histories don't contain the suffering endured by the victims of these tragedies but we saw that, because they also don't contain the victims themselves, they fail to satisfy our person-centred wishes. These are ways in which history could have been better in an impersonal sense. And, regarded, from such an impersonal perspective, *history could have been better through and through*. It needn't have contained all the great tragedies of the past, nor other tragedies that would have made that alternative overall as bad or worse.

The problem with history is that, so long as what we care about is how things go for the people who had *actually* existed, then history could have been better only in a highly constrained way, only at a narrow band. After all, if history had taken a better turn at 1346 this could have been better only for the people who had been alive at that point, and to some who were born shortly afterwards. It would have been better *only* for the victims of the Black Plague. This is because in wishing that things had been better at *that* point in history, we would also need to hold the prior past fixed (otherwise the people we wish to 'save' wouldn't even come to exist). That counterfactual history couldn't be better for the victims of these earlier tragedies, though they would at least still exist in that alternative. And the vast majority of the people who had existed past this first intervention point would no longer get born. This alternative history would not, of course, be better for them either.

In other words, *history couldn't have realistically been jointly better for all of the people who had existed*. History could have been better at one point in history, or at another, but that's it. There is no way to 'add up' various local person-centred improvements to get even better alternative histories. Actual history is depressing enough but it is sobering to realize that, realistically, things just *couldn't* have been a lot better, at least not in the ways that most matter to us.

This is a surprising result that hints at an important way in which the person-centred view needs to be qualified.³² But before turning to that, I wish to address a more direct worry about the person-centred perspective.

Not Because Non-Existence is Harmful

The worry is that the person-centred perspective presupposes the highly controversial idea that non-existence is harmful. For when we roll back history to

³¹ The earlier quote from Adams implies that this is acceptable given that he complains *specifically* about wishing ourselves away for merely 'abstract' value—implying that doing so for the sake of past victims *is* acceptable.

³² Notice, however, that this isn't an upshot of the person-centred perspective itself, but of adopting such a perspective *in a world where existence is precarious*. This precariousness is contingent. If, for example, we were Cartesian souls whom God (or Karma) would implant in one fetus or another regardless of what happens in history, then—setting aside changes in population size—existence wouldn't be precarious and there *could* be realistic alternative histories where things go wonderfully for *everyone* who had ever existed.

some past point—say, August 1914—then the people who were born afterwards are still merely possible people, and in the counterfactual histories in which WWI is averted, they remain so. And in wishing that WWI had been averted, it's not as if we are killing off these people, or literally replacing them. We are just preferring histories where they never come to exist. So why should we be reluctant to wish these people away, if not for the assumption that not to come to exist is to be made worse-off?

This objection misunderstands the person-centred perspective. To begin with, the view that existence is a benefit and non-existence harmful is actually very different from the person-centred perspective. To be sure, on such a view people who had actually existed would be worse-off in alternatives in which they are never born. But those who 'replace' them would benefit, cancelling out this harm. If anything, we get a result that is extensionally the same as the impersonal standpoint.

The person-centred perspective involves a very different claim: the claim that actual people matter in ways that merely possible people don't. We can, and should, feel compassion for actual people, and care about what happens (or had happened) to them. We should care about them for their own sake. By contrast, it makes no sense to care in this way about merely possible people.³³

What follows is this. *Given* that certain people did come to exist, and some of them had suffered greatly, we should now wish that things had been better for them, and this can only happen in counterfactual histories in which they *do* exist (see fig. 1). This is why we should prefer counterfactuals in which these victims still exist, and things go better for them, over ones where they aren't even born. For suppose that possibilities in which these victims don't come to exist aren't worse for them—nor, presumably better (if their lives were worth living). It would still be the case that there are numerous alternative histories that clearly *are* better for them—it surely would have been far better, for an enslaved African who perished in the Jamaican plantations, to have instead lived as a free woman, dying of old age. Such an alternative would answer our wish that things had been better for that person in a way that an alternative from which she is absent obviously won't, whether or not we want to say that this alternative would have made her worse off. By contrast, from a perspective of concern for this enslaved African there is nothing to be said for the numerous alternatives in which she doesn't even come to exist. That's why, even if such alternatives aren't worse *for* her, they are still, in this respect, *worse histories*. That's all the person-centred perspective on the past requires.³⁴

³³ Wallace similarly writes that '[actual] human beings... make claims on us... that merely possible people do not' (Wallace, 2013, p. 89), and in his unpublished 2015 *Uehiro Lectures*, Scheffler argued that value-based attachments can only be directed at what is (or has been) actual. Conservatism about value would also support the person-centred claim (see Cohen, 2012).

³⁴ For a similar view see Arrhenius and Rabinowicz, 2015, who suggest that although counterfactuals in which some existing person doesn't come to exist *are* worse for her (viewed from the actual world), this doesn't commit us to also holding that *if* these possibilities had *actually* been realised, that *would have been* worse for her.

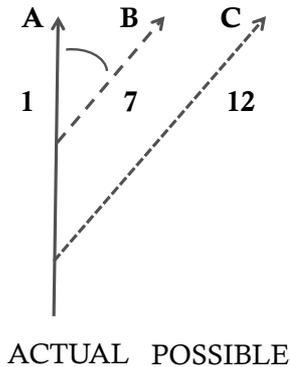


Figure 1. The person-centred perspective favours counterfactuals where things had gone better for actual persons (B) over impersonally superior alternatives in which they don't even exist (C); this doesn't require holding that (C) would have been worse *for* the relevant persons. The low positive value represents a period blighted by tragedy—a negative value would have given the impression that lives in that period were not worth living but that is arguably false even of the lives of many of the victims of history's worst atrocities.

It is of course still true that if things had actually gone differently, then most of the people who were born after August 1914 would have faded into mere possibility. But that's beside the point. If history *had* taken that different turn, then admittedly those people wouldn't have had any special claim on the attentions of those who, in that alternative history, would have replaced them—and who would have replaced us as looking back at the past now.

But this isn't how things have turned out. We aren't evaluating things *from* that counterfactual alternative, but from the actual world, in which these people did come to exist, and this changes how we should regard counterfactuals in which they still exist and fare better—as well as ones from which they are absent. What *had* actually happened changes how we should feel about what *might have* happened.

This also occurs in personal contexts. We are glad to have met those we love. We prefer meeting our beloved to alternative lives we might have led, lives in which we meet and fall in love with others. In having this preference, we needn't naively assume that the life we have is the very best we could have possibly had. Nor must we believe that we were *destined* to meet our beloved, or deny that, if we had never met her or him, we would neither regret nor (for all we know) have reason to regret this. Yet, all the same, we can be glad that we met our beloved, and prefer this to these other possibilities. Given that we *have* met and fallen in love with someone, we regard what might have been in a different light.³⁵

³⁵ See here McMahan, 2005, pp. 159-61; Harman, 2009; Wallace, 2013. There are of course more familiar ways in which we can be justifiably partial to those we care about, for example, by giving them priority over strangers. And there are also, I believe, justifiable forms of historical partiality: we can permissibly pay more attention to past events involving our ancestors, country, or cultural tradition—which isn't the same as permitting us to wish that others had suffered more in order for our ancestors to fare better.

V.

The Longue Durée

I have argued that our core attitudes to the past should have a person-centred focus. But a *purely* person-centred view—a perspective that gives moral significance *only* to actual people, past or present—also seems to me indefensible.

To begin with, such a view is in tension with familiar ways of thinking about history. We often focus on the immediate aftermath of events, on the step from the assassination to the trenches. But we sometimes take a longer view. It is widely believed that, as US historian Franz Stern put it, WWI was ‘the first calamity of the twentieth century, the calamity from which all other calamities sprang.’³⁶ Others lament or applaud the long-term consequences of, say, the French or Russian Revolutions. But these couldn’t be purely person-centred valuations.

Gibbon speculated that if Charles Martel hadn’t defeated the Saracens in 733 then “[p]erhaps the interpretation of the Koran would now be taught in the schools of Oxford, and her pulpits might demonstrate to a circumcised people the sanctity and truth of the revelation of Mohammed.”³⁷ But this dramatic change couldn’t have made the lives of actual later generations better or worse since if Charles Martel had been defeated, they would never have been born. And the same goes for the long-term effects of the French Revolution or Constantine’s conversion—not to mention the agricultural revolution, which Jared Diamond once described as ‘the worst mistake in the history of the human race’.³⁸

The Great War presents a mixed case. Of those born before August 1914, many survived the calamity of WWI, and some of these were the victims of later 20th century calamities and would have benefited from the prevention of WWI. But, like these later calamities themselves, many of those born after August 1914 also sprang from that first calamity. If there were no Great War, they wouldn’t have even existed. They would have gained nothing.

Now a purely person-centred perspective isn’t strictly speaking incompatible with such long-term evaluations. It just claims that they don’t matter. What follows the point where a given intervention no longer makes a person-centred difference is a matter of indifference—even if it relates to counterfactuals spanning thousands of years. We can remain indifferent to vast differences in possible impersonal value. But surely there is at least something to be said for preferring an impersonally very good continuation to one that involves great misery, or even extinction? Worse, on a purely person-centred view we shouldn’t hesitate to prefer that the past had gone in ways that were merely slightly better for historically actual people, but where numerous merely possible persons also come to exist and suffer greatly. This seems wrong.³⁹

The Asymmetry, Spelled Out Backwards

A plausible person-centred view will therefore need to give weight to some impersonal considerations. Here is how this might be done.

³⁶ Cited in Clark, 2013.

³⁷ Gibbon, 1788.

³⁸ Diamond, 1987. For a book length defence of this claim, see Scott, 2017.

³⁹ In the same way that a purely person-centred view in the forward-looking direction seems wrong, telling us to slightly benefit the present generation even if the longer term outcome for later generations, whose existence depends on these acts, is massively worse.

It seems *wrong* to *create* someone who will be miserable, yet *not wrong* not to *create* someone who will be very happy. This is a familiar intuitive asymmetry in the forward-looking direction.⁴⁰ Applied ‘backwards’, and stated in terms of reasons for attitudes rather than the wrongness of action, we get the following: perhaps we needn’t wish for changes to history that will mean that possible people would come into existence and have good lives, but do have reason *not* to wish for changes that will mean that possible persons will come into existence and have *miserable* lives.⁴¹

This would account for the intuition that there’s something wrong about casually wishing into existence miserable possible persons. And this introduces an important impersonal constraint on how we may defensibly wish things had been. We no longer have a purely person-centred perspective. This, however, doesn’t significantly affect the earlier discussion. The impersonal pressures that we rejected as implausible mostly concerned impersonally better alternative histories that involve replacing *miserable actual people* with *happier possible people*. Such preferences aren’t supported by the backward-looking version of the intuitive asymmetry.

The asymmetry might be understood to strictly forbid preferring any alternatives in which some possible people come into existence and have bad lives. This seems too strong. That some possible people with not so great lives will come into existence will be an unavoidable consequence of nearly any non-trivial historical change. It seems more plausible to understand the asymmetry as giving us some reason against preferring such alternatives, reasons that can be outweighed by other considerations. However, if we give priority to person-centred considerations, then there could still be cases where we would have most reason to prefer to ‘shift’ evil from actual to possible persons: to prefer an alternative course of history in which some actual tragedy is avoided, but where instead some merely possible people suffer. This result is admittedly unpleasant, but it is not clearly wrong.

VI.

History and Value

We have so far largely focused on questions about what attitudes we should have towards the past, and whether, and how, we should wish things had gone differently. Those who think that because we cannot change the past it is pointless to have such attitudes to history will probably dismiss these questions.

That would be a mistake. Such attitudes are not pointless, since the point of our attitudes to the past isn’t to change it. Their point is to respond to the value the past contains. And such attitudes are anyway implicit in many of our common sentiments about historical events—sadness or outrage or disgust at some past tragedy are all already tied to wishing that things had been otherwise. To give up such backward-looking preference is to end up being indifferent to the horrors it contains.

But we can set all this to one side. *We, and our attitudes, are not essential to the main point.*

Instead of asking whether we should wish for, or prefer, some possible history to the actual one, or to another alternative, we can simply ask whether it’s *better* than the other. These are evaluative questions we often do ask about history, and they will

⁴⁰ McMahan, 2009; Roberts, 2011.

⁴¹ Some may want to add here when a historical ‘choice’ makes no difference to actual people, there is at least something to be said for preferring those timelines that lead to greater impersonal value.

receive radically different answers depending on whether we adopt the impersonal or the person-centred perspective, or some combination thereof:

(a) As we saw, historical alternatives that would have dramatically changed who later came to exist can, from that point onwards, only be impersonally better.

(b) Events can impact who later exists quickly or slowly, on a smaller or larger scale (a sudden global conflict can change the identities of those who get born next within days). This is unimportant from an impersonal standpoint but can make all the difference from a person-centred one. And in principle, events might have massive effects on identity without making much difference to overall impersonal value.⁴²

(c) Alternative histories in which more people come to exist—say if China’s ‘one child’ policy had been revoked—would often be better from an impersonal perspective. But such changes won’t matter in themselves from a person-centred perspective, even if the added lives are extremely good.

(d) Once ‘new’ people are in play, then on the impersonal perspective losses in welfare to actual people who still exist in that alternative history can be traded-off with gains in value brought in by the added people. An alternative can therefore be far worse to actual people while still being impersonally superior.

(e) Conversely, an alternative history in which a calamitous war is merely postponed for a few decades, and therefore affects only possible people, while the original victims instead lead better lives, would be, in this respect, better on person-centred grounds yet needn’t be impersonally better.

In these ways, some courses of history can be better in impersonal terms without being in any way better (or even being worse) from a person-centred standpoint, and vice versa (see fig. 2).

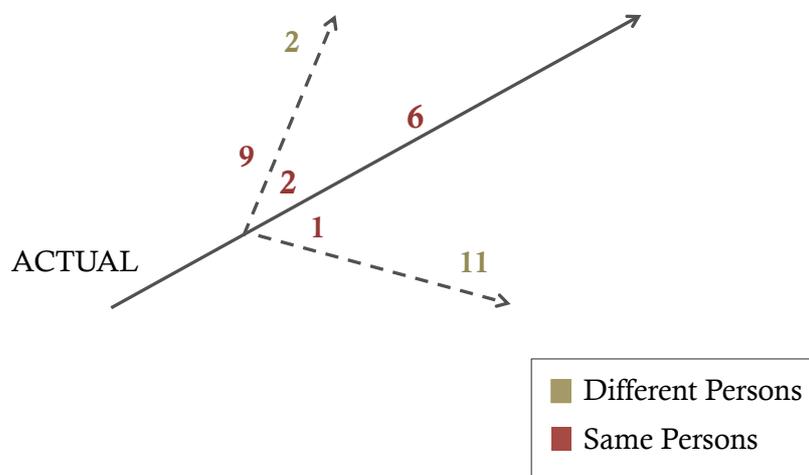


Figure 2. The impersonal and person-centred perspectives offer competing verdicts on possible courses of history. Only comparisons at or near a given branch line involve person-centred comparisons—here, in H_3 actual people would have been even worse-off than actual history H_2 , while in H_1 they would have been much better-off; the people who had existed later would disappear. The impersonal perspective would regard H_3 as superior while person-centred views would favour H_1 .

⁴² Fogel, 1964 famously argued that the invention of the railways made little difference to the US economy. But, as Parfit famously noted, it obviously had a vast impact on who came to exist (cf. Parfit, 1984, p. 361).

These assessments of historical betterness admittedly still involve comparisons with counterfactual alternatives. Those who dismiss counterfactual history as merely a fanciful exercise will probably still not be impressed. The Marxist historian E. H. Carr, for example, wrote that counterfactual history is a mere ‘parlour game’,⁴³ and E. P. Thompson dismissed ‘counterfactual fictions’ as mere ‘*Geschichtswissenschaft*, unhistorical shit’.⁴⁴ This is a common enough view.

Epistemic worries about whether we can tell what would have happened if things had gone differently are of course valid if overstated. But things don’t become less important just because it’s hard for us to know about them. And questions about what we should wish for, and similarly questions about whether one possible course of history is better than another, needn’t involve straight counterfactual *predictions*, only comparisons of realistic alternatives.

But suppose that we tried to avoid all counterfactual historical speculations, and therefore refrained from considering what alternative history we might wish for, or whether one possible course of history is better than another. We will still, however, need to ascribe *non-comparative* value to *actual* events. We will still need to consider whether various historical events are good or bad, important or unimportant. We can’t sanely deny that the Holocaust was horrific, or the awfulness of instances of genocide and slavery.

The problem is that the non-comparative value of many actual events straightforwardly *depends* on counterfactuals and on assessments of counterfactual value. Now some historical events (wars and earthquakes and plagues) primarily matter because they literally *contain* a great deal of badness. But others (an assassination, the signing of a treaty, a policy of appeasement) primarily matter extrinsically, through their wider effects.

The Archduke’s death was plainly bad for him, but it was also bad for very many other people, bad in virtue of its immense historical impact. The Archduke’s assassination was historically bad in this broad sense, and, correlatively, historically *important*, because of the difference it made. But to determine that difference, we can’t help but consider how things would have gone if the Archduke had ducked the bullet—not how his own life would have continued, but how global history would have been like. If we believe, as some historians do, that WWI was avoidable, then this will greatly increase the badness of the assassination. If we believe, as Marxist historical determinists used to, that a massive war was an inevitable outcome of the geopolitical situation *whether or not the Archduke was assassinated*, then Franz Ferdinand’s death was far less important.

In other words, when we ask, of some actual historical event,

Was it good or bad that...? Was it important that...?

the answer often enough depends on evaluations of how things would have gone in counterfactual courses of history.⁴⁵ And this means that even the non-comparative value of actual historical events will often depend on whether we adopt an impersonal or person-centred perspective. The non-identity problem can’t be avoided: it infects historical value and importance quite generally.⁴⁶

⁴³ Carr, 1987, p. 105.

⁴⁴ Thompson, 1978, p. 300. For a more recent critique see Evans, 2013.

⁴⁵ Notice that such evaluations *do* require straight predictions about what *would* have happened if history had taken some different turn.

⁴⁶ I have argued that the division between the person-centred and the impersonal already arises at the level of value judgments. But of course value and attitude may be intimately linked. On some views, our attitudes are the source of value. On others, claims about value can be understood in terms

VII.

Ethics and the Past

We were once advised to say ‘No’ to the history of philosophy. No one even bothers to say ‘No’ to the philosophy of history. Ethics has certainly had only little to say about history, or how the past matters. Ethical theories have been almost exclusively concerned with how we should act, or otherwise with how we might causally influence things. But the past is immutable. Nothing we can do now will change it. This is perhaps why ethical theories typically take the past to matter only insofar as it may bear on present action (by giving, for example, reasons to redistribute, apologise or punish), and give moral weight to attitudes to the past only insofar as they bear on the self, or have beneficial consequences.

The past, however, doesn’t matter because it’s useful or edifying. The past matters in itself. Or more precisely, the past matters because it contains a vast amount of things that matter: because it contains suffering and death and injustice and virtue and achievement and all that. This is why we need to know about, and care about, history.

It’s here, however, that a version of the non-identity problem gets in the way. It means that it isn’t clear what attitudes we should have to the past, or even what are the appropriate objects of these attitudes. This is because things in the past can matter from either an impersonal or a person-centred perspective, and these viewpoints often push in opposing directions. This is overlooked by common attitudes and evaluative judgments about the past, even those of sophisticated historians.⁴⁷ But we must choose between these opposing visions of the past, or some combination thereof. While the impersonal perspective is clean and simple, I’ve argued that it cannot capture what most matters to us about the past and that it has implausible implications. When we look back, our attitudes should focus on the people who had actually lived, and on the ways things could have been better to them. But a person-centred perspective on history also leads to surprising results and, to be plausible, it needs to be constrained by impersonal factors. A final theory will be complicated.⁴⁸

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of claims about fitting attitudes or at least imply such claims. Since we cannot decently refrain from ascribing value to past events, the aforementioned links would directly undermine any crude dismissal of attitudes to the past.

⁴⁷ Including even the writing of historians specializing in counterfactuals. For example, Tetlock et al., 2006 assume they would have still existed even if China had been the dominant world power instead of the West, while Lebow, 2014 speculates about what Obama would be doing if Franz Ferdinand had survived.

⁴⁸ Versions of this paper were presented in Edinburgh, Geneva, Oslo, Tokyo, Toronto and Birmingham, and I am grateful to the audiences on these occasions for helpful comments. I also benefited from discussion with Tom Douglas and Nick Shackel and from extremely helpful comments by Tom Hurka as well as by several anonymous referees. I am especially grateful to Saul Smilansky, both for his insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper as well as for writing the wonderful paper that first spurred me to think about this topic. The great Derek Parfit unexpectedly passed away while I was writing this paper and I deeply regret that I never managed to discuss it with him—though he would have probably found my defence of the person-centred perspective regrettable.

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