

# Do Future People Matter?

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## I. INTRODUCTION

While many people instinctively agree that future generations are worthy of consideration when deciding between policy options, whether this instinct can be rationally justified has been a matter of philosophical dispute. Most notably, the nonidentity problem challenges the notion that existing people can, in any way, harm future people. As such, many philosophers have attempted to produce an account of well-being and harm that solves the nonidentity problem without leading to absurd conclusions. This essay will argue that we cannot justifiably ignore future people when deciding what policy option to pursue. This argument will be predicated on a sufficientarian theory of welfare, which I deem the best response to the nonidentity problem. I will first articulate how the nonidentity problem compellingly refutes our supposed duties to safeguard the well-being of future people. I will then argue that sufficientarianism can justify these duties and thereby, resolving the nonidentity problem. In doing so, I will demonstrate how the present theory circumvents the flaws of alternative solutions and will defend it against various objections.

## II. THE NONIDENTITY PROBLEM

Parfit's (1984) nonidentity problem questions our intuitions about the obligations we think we have toward future people. Suppose the person-affecting principle is true which states that an act can only be wrong if it harms some existing or future person, i.e., it makes that person worse off than they would have otherwise been under an alternative act (Parfit 1984, 363). We can also observe that ordinary acts often have an

“existence-inducing nature” insofar as they will inevitably alter the time and manner of conception for future people, generating an entirely distinct population in the distant future. Kavka (1982) describes this phenomenon as the “precariousness” of existence (83).

Now, consider the case where a person who, by our present acts, is both caused to exist and to have an existence that is flawed but not so flawed that it is less than worth having. Parfit (1984) argues that, in such cases, a person’s life is unavoidably flawed because it is the flawed conditions themselves which give rise to their existence. Any alternative act that improved those conditions would have brought a different person into existence, a person who is nonidentical but better off. Since we assumed that our original person’s existence is worth having, and alternative acts would have instead brought about their nonexistence, it is argued that such acts cannot possibly have “wronged” that future person. However, many find these results implausible.

Imagine, for example, the depletion policy (Parfit 1984, 361–363). Suppose a government has to make a policy decision between depleting and conserving certain resources. Under the depletion choice, the consumption of such resources would marginally increase the general level of well-being for the next two centuries, but this would be at the cost of those resources becoming unduly scarce for future generations such that they will suffer disproportionately as result. Under the conservation approach, the well-being of current and future generations would be roughly similar, both enjoying sufficiently good lives. While “the great lowering of the quality of life must provide some moral reason not to choose depletion,” the nonidentity problem seems to show that depletion harms no one (Parfit 1984, 363). Pursuing the conservation policy instead would have changed the time and manner of conception for future people, changing the identities of those conceived and thus, producing a distinct population. Any suffering, therefore, of people under the depletion choice is unavoidable if those people are ever to exist at all. Since, by assumption, these lives are

worth living, the claim that the depletion choice is wrong seems morally unsubstantiated.

Ultimately, since all premises of this argument other than the person-affecting principle have garnered much support, the nonidentity problem highlights the need to develop an account of well-being and harm that transcends this principle – an impersonal account. Such an account, if it exists, would allow us to compare the moral desirability of populations as a whole, without reference to the specific identities of the constituent individuals. This account – “Theory X” – would allow us to claim that, for example, the depletion policy is wrong and that we ought not to pursue it since it produces a population that is, in some way, “worse off.”

### **III. SUFFICIENTARIANISM: A POTENTIAL SOLUTION**

I propose that the sufficientarian theory of well-being allows us to generate such insights without causing further problems. Sufficientarianism rests on the principle of sufficiency which states that it is intrinsically bad if any person is not sufficiently well-off and that this is made worse the farther from sufficiency a person is and the more people who are not sufficiently well-off (Huseby 2010, 180). From a sufficientarian view, we have moral reasons to minimise the number of people below the sufficiency threshold. However, this view is indifferent to the well-being of those above this threshold. Following Huseby (2012), we can set the sufficiency threshold at a level of well-being which guarantees that people have “a reasonable chance of being content” (193). If we consider zero as denoting the level of welfare at which life is worth living, we can plausibly assume that the sufficiency threshold is strictly greater than zero since many would agree that there is a significant difference between a content life and a life barely worth living.

Sufficientarianism allows us to refute various forms of the nonidentity problem by observing that some states of affairs are evaluatively bad or worse than others, even if they are not worse for specific individuals. For example, recall Parfit's (1984) depletion example. We can imagine that future generations under the depletion policy would lead lives that are still worth living but that do not guarantee a reasonable chance of being content and thus, below the sufficiency threshold. We can also imagine that under the conservation policy, current generations would

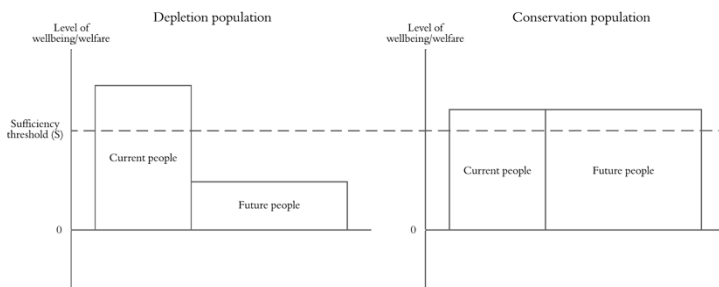


FIGURE 1

be slightly worse off than under depletion but still above the sufficiency threshold. This level would hold for future generations as well, which yields the following comparison:

The number of people living below the sufficiency threshold is greater under the depletion policy than under conservation and thus, we have adequate moral reason to pursue conservation over depletion. Hence, in cases where the welfare of future people would be below the sufficiency threshold, sufficientarianism plausibly resolves the nonidentity problem and thus, justifies our consideration of future people when deciding between policy options.

#### IV. AVOIDING ABSURD CONCLUSIONS

The sufficientarian theory of welfare also allows us to evade the absurd conclusions of other welfare theories. Many utilitarian theories, including totalism which measures the “goodness” of a state of affairs

by the sum of its welfare, imply the Repugnant Conclusion: for any population (A) with very high positive welfare, there is a population (Z) with very low positive welfare which is better, given this population is sufficiently large (Parfit 1984, 387).

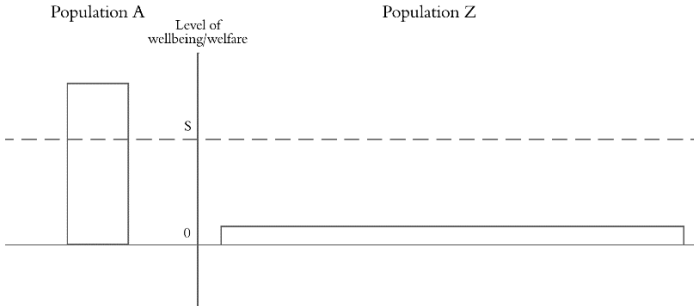


FIGURE 2

Many find “repugnant” the idea that lives barely worth living could be considered more desirable than lives of bliss. Under sufficientarianism, this intuition is vindicated. Since decreases in welfare to a point below the sufficiency threshold cannot be offset by an increase in population, as this would simply add to the number of insufficiently well-off people, the Repugnant Conclusion as stated above does not hold in general.

Moreover, sufficientarianism also avoids the Very Repugnant Conclusion: for any population (A) with very high positive welfare, and any number of lives with very negative welfare, there is a population ( $Z^*$ ) consisting of the lives with negative welfare and lives with very low positive welfare which is better than the high welfare population (Arrhenius 2012, 60). While this result holds for totalism, it does not hold for a sufficientarian theory of welfare.

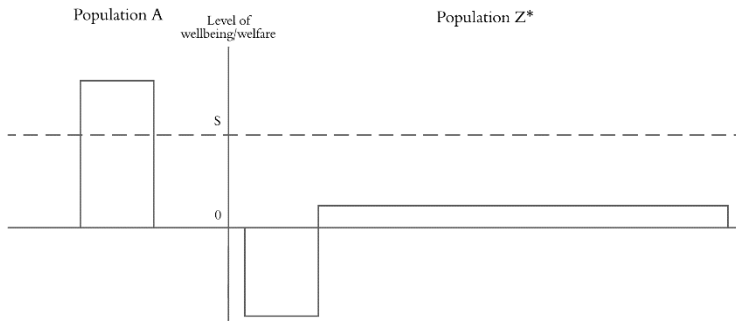


FIGURE 3

Finally, we can consider the Very Sadistic Conclusion of critical-level utilitarianism: for any population (X) with negative welfare, there is a population (Y) with positive welfare which is worse (Arrhenius 2012, 85). Critical-level utilitarianism generates this conclusion since positive welfare beneath the critical level (S) counts negatively toward the sum. While this result strikes many as objectionable, it would seem that the present theory has a similar attitude toward insufficiency, insofar as it would be possible, for any population of negative welfare, to construct a population of people with positive but sub-sufficient welfare which is worse.

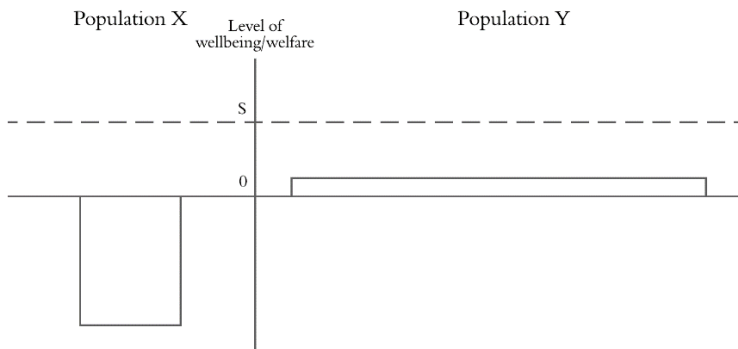


FIGURE 4

However, Huseby (2012) argues that it is possible to avoid the Very Sadistic Conclusion if we grant that, although worthwhile lives below the sufficiency threshold are bad, “it is lexically worse if people have

lives below the neutral level” (194). In other words, having one person suffer a life of negative well-being is worse than having any number of people live insufficiently well-off lives. This additional consideration not only avoids the Very Sadistic Conclusion, but also reflects the significant intuitive difference between “having a life worth living, and having a life of constant pain” (Ibid). Therefore, it is clear that sufficientarianism is capable of providing an impersonal account of morality without surrendering itself to common absurdities.

## V. THE SOFTENING OBJECTION AND THE EXTENDED VIEW

The most notable objection to the sufficientarian view is that, while it does address cases of the nonidentity problem where the welfare of future people is below the sufficiency threshold, it fails to account for cases where a future person is caused to have a worse life but is still above the threshold (Roberts 2019). If acts which cause such a worsening can be considered wrong, it follows that sufficientarianism does not completely solve the nonidentity problem, but rather softens its blow.

For example, consider the blinded child case (Roberts 2019). Imagine two parents who wish to conceive a child but only on the condition that they commit an act before conception that causes the child to be born blind such that blindness is a condition for the child’s existence. Suppose this child is, nonetheless, sufficiently well-off. Many would consider the activities undertaken by the parents to be wrong. However, since sufficientarianism is indifferent to lives above the threshold, there seems to be no ground upon which this claim can be made. Similarly, we can consider a modified version of the depletion example from before. If instead, we assumed that the welfare of future people under depletion is lower than under conservation but still above the sufficiency threshold, sufficientarianism would have no reason to

choose conservation over depletion. Hence, it would seem that the nonidentity problem remains unsolved.

I concede this objection and believe that the non-maximising conception of sufficientarianism advanced thus far is ill-equipped to surmount it. However, by modifying the sufficientarian indifference claim, I believe such an objection may be overcome. Rather than asserting that under no circumstances does welfare above the sufficiency threshold matter, we could instead assert that it does, but only once insufficiency has been properly addressed. This produces a new form of sufficientarianism which states that population A is better (morally) than a population B if and only if either one of the following conditions holds:

The total insufficiency of A is strictly less than the total insufficiency of B; or

The total sufficiency of A is greater than the total sufficiency of B, given that A and B have the same amount of total insufficiency.

In other words, this revision means that, morally, our first priority is to reduce insufficiency below zero, our second priority is to reduce insufficiency above zero, and our last priority is to maximise sufficiency. We can call this view 'extended sufficientarianism'.

Under extended sufficientarianism, we can reach much more defensible conclusions. For example, in the above case of the blinded child, suppose we make the modest assumption that the child's lifetime well-being is marginally lower than it would have been if they had never been blinded. Subsequently, we can now claim that, since all else remains constant (particularly, the world level of insufficiency), bringing into existence a child who is blind is worse than bringing into existence one who is not since the former does not maximise welfare above the threshold. Moreover, in the modified depletion case, we would also be justified in pursuing conservation over depletion since



this would maximise sufficiency for future people. It is also important to note that the absurd conclusions remain false under extended sufficientarianism as their rejection relied purely on the first condition of the above reasoning. Hence, it is plausible that extended sufficientarianism produces the correct moral judgements in all cases of the nonidentity problem.

## VI. THE SURVIVAL OF THE REPUGNANT CONCLUSION

One possible objection to extended sufficientarianism is that it still implies a milder form of the Repugnant Conclusion: for any population (A) with very high sufficient welfare, there is a population (C) with welfare just above sufficiency which is better, given this population is sufficiently large.

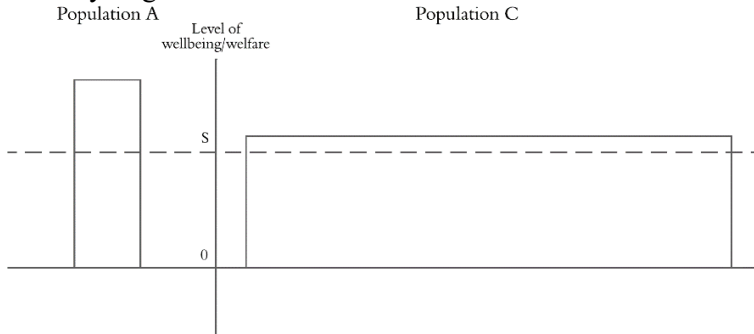


FIGURE 5

While some might argue that this result is still “repugnant,” I would argue that this position is, in fact, defensible. Consider two worlds: one with five extraordinarily well-off people, living lives of pure bliss, and one with millions of people who are just sufficiently well-off. We must recall that a life just above sufficiency is a life that is not just worth living, but one that yields a reasonable chance of being content. Under these definitions, it is plausible that the latter population is, as extended sufficientarianism claims, more desirable. This is because more people

can participate in a life of contentment and yet no single person is caused to be insufficiently well-off. This result is also in accordance with the egalitarian intuition that welfare significantly higher than sufficiency for a small number of people is not a particularly “good” outcome, and that it would be better for this surplus welfare to instead be dispersed amongst a larger group of people. Ergo, while a mild form of the Repugnant Conclusion survives under extended sufficientarianism, I find this to be a virtue rather than a vice.

## VII. LEXICALITY OBJECTION

One further objection to sufficientarianism which remains pertinent for the extended view is known as the “lexicality objection” which argues that it is implausible that “small reductions in negative welfare ... outweigh endless gains in positive welfare” (Huseby 2012, 196). However, again, I find this position defensible. It must first be noted that to claim otherwise – to claim that negative welfare can, in some way, be outweighed by positive welfare – would likely commit oneself to the Very Sadistic Conclusion which is undoubtedly a more absurd proposition. Nevertheless, we can, again, imagine two worlds: one with millions in bliss but one insufficiently well-off person, and one with 100 people, all of whom are sufficiently well-off. Sufficientarianism would claim that the latter is more desirable than the former. While this may seem counterintuitive to some, one might observe that in the first world, there is some badness. However, in the second there is none. Furthermore, many would share the intuition that more welfare above what one requires to be content is not particularly morally relevant, especially if it comes at the cost of others. Hence, while the objection to lexicality is plausible on its surface, various observations can put this result on solid ground.

## VIII. CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that we cannot justifiably ignore future people when deciding between policy options since certain policies may produce worlds that are worse than others. To substantiate this claim, I argued that extended sufficientarianism was the most plausible solution to the nonidentity problem as it avoided the counterintuitive results of competing theories and also averted the softening objection. I further articulated potential criticisms of this view concerning the survival of the repugnant conclusion and the implausibility of lexicality, demonstrating how these objections lack intuitive force and how they can be considered positive features rather than flaws. Ultimately, one must see that extended sufficientarianism is a plausible theory of population ethics which provides compelling reasons to consider future people in our policy decisions.

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