

The Non-Identity Problem

In order to understand the Non-Identity Problem, we need to establish the following four things:

1) You Are The Result of a Unique Sperm-Egg Combination: Here is a plausible assumption: If your parents had conceived a child a month later or a month earlier than the actual date that you were conceived, you would never have been born. In other words, you are the result of a particular sperm and egg combination, and any other combination would have resulted in someone who was not you.

2) Present Actions Can Affect Who Will Exist In The Future: It seems reasonable to suggest that certain actions in the present can affect who will exist in the future. For instance, imagine that you are deciding whether to hire a young woman who was recently married. It just might be the case that, if you hire her, she and her husband will decide to wait a year to conceive a child. However, if you do not hire her, they will decide to conceive right away. Given claim (1), these two dates of conception will result in two different children. So, your decision to hire or not can actually have an effect on which child is born and which child is not. That is, different present actions might result in different future people.

3) It Is Possible to Harm a Future Person: Consider the following case:

- Broken Glass: I go camping and leave a bunch of broken glass bottles in the woods. I realize that someone may step on this glass and hurt themselves, so perhaps I should bury it. I do not bury it. As it turns out, 20 years pass before someone is hurt. In 20 years, a young child steps on the glass and cuts their foot badly.

Note that my action has harmed this child, even though the child was not yet born when I threw the glass on the ground. So, it is possible for our present actions to harm future persons who are not yet born.

4) Temporal Distance Is Not Morally Relevant: When we harm someone in the distant future, the fact that they are temporally distant is not morally relevant. Being far away in time does not make the harm that we do to them less bad. To illustrate, consider the relevance of spatial distance:

- Poison Mail: I mail two boxes full of poison to two different people. One person lives in the same city as I do. The other person lives in China. Both people open the mail, and instantly die.

Do you think that what I did to the person in my own city was worse than what I did to the person in China? If spatial distance were a morally relevant feature of assessing harm, then it should be less wrong to poison the person in China, because they are so far away. But, it seems that neither of the two murders is worse than the other. So, spatial distance does not seem to be a morally relevant feature when determining how wrong it is to harm someone.

But, if spatial distance is not morally relevant, then why should temporal distance be relevant? Consider this case:

- Radioactive Material: I have a big pile of radioactive material that I need to get rid of. I divide the material into two portions, burying one portion in a nearby neighborhood, and the other portion just outside of town, in a location that I know the city has future development plans for. After one year, the portion in the nearby neighborhood has killed 100 people living there. It is then found and disposed of properly. The portion outside of town remains harmless until a neighborhood is built on top of it 20 years later. It then kills 100 people living nearby. That portion of radioactive material is then found and also disposed of properly.

Do you think that what I did to the people in the nearby neighborhood was worse than what I did to the people who built their homes outside of town? If temporal distance were a morally relevant feature of assessing harm, then it should be less wrong to harm the future people. But, it seems that neither of the two burial acts is worse than the other. So, distance across time does not seem to be morally relevant.

The Problem

We are now ready to examine the actual problem. Consider the following:

- Blind Child: A woman is deciding whether or not to conceive a child. The doctor tells her that, due to some medication she is currently on, if she conceives now, she will conceive a child that will be born blind. However, if she stops taking the medication and waits a month for it to clear her system before conceiving, she will conceive a normal, healthy child. Though, either way, we can assume that the child's life will (as a whole) be a good life—a life worth living. She considers the doctor's advice. However, she decides to conceive now anyway. Her child is born blind.

Do you think that this woman has done something wrong in this case? The intuition that most of us have is that she has acted wrongly: She has seriously

wronged her child. If she had simply waited one more month before conceiving, her child would not have been born blind.

But, consider points (1) and (2), above. If the woman had waited a month before conceiving, she would have conceived a different child. In other words, the blind child would not have existed AT ALL if the woman had waited another month to conceive. So, the two alternatives for the blind child are either (a) a good life without sight, or (b) NO LIFE AT ALL. Surely a good life without sight is better than no life at all. So, it seems that the woman has not harmed that particular child by deciding not to wait a month before conceiving.

So, why do we think that what she does is wrong? Parfit suggests the following:

Plausible Principle: If there are two possible outcomes, where different person(s) are created in each scenario, it is worse to bring about the outcome where the person(s) created have a lower quality of life.

The idea is that, if you can create someone with a mediocre life or someone with a good life, it is better to create the one with the good life because that is the better of the two options. That seems plausible. But, note that a few things result from this principle:

1. In the Blind Child case, we could truthfully say to the blind child, "It would be better if you had never existed." Do we really want to admit that this is true? Note that this does not mean that it is BAD for the blind child to exist, but merely that, if its mother had waited to conceive, a different child with a better life would have been born instead.

2. Notice that this explanation does not assign wrongness to the mother's action because it harms the child. If what the mother does is wrong ONLY because it violates the principle above, then we must admit that she does not harm anyone by having the blind child. Rather, what she does is wrong only insofar as we think we are obligated to always bring about the best possible outcome. This sounds very Utilitarian, doesn't it? But, what if we reject that consequentialist view? Is her action still wrong?

3. Parfit notes that this principle doesn't apply to cases where we have "different number choices." That is, sometimes, our choices do not only affect WHO will be born, but HOW MANY people will be born. What if our two options result in very different numbers of people? How do we assess wrongness in that case?

Let's consider some a "different number choice" now:

- Conservation vs. Depletion: Politicians worldwide convene in order to decide what to do about the use of fossil fuels. We can: (1) Conserve, such that things won't be optimal for the present population, but the future generations will have enough fuel to live comfortably. (2) Deplete, such that the present population gets to "live it up" as much as possible, but the future generations will decline in population and live poorer lives because we will have depleted all of the fuel. Either choice will result in completely different populations by the time 200 years has passed.

Should we conserve our resources or deplete them? We might think that, by depleting, we harm the future generations. But notice that, if we deplete, it will not be bad for anyone in particular. The future generations who live their lives as farmers without electricity will have no complaint against us if we decide to deplete. For, if we had conserved, an entirely different population would have resulted and they would not have existed at all. So, assuming the life of a farmer is still a good one—i.e., it is worth living—those future people would prefer that we deplete the resources. The alternative is for them to not exist at all (if we conserve instead).

So, depleting the resources is not bad for anyone. But, then, why do we think it is wrong to deplete? Perhaps we can modify the previous principle:

Total Utility Principle: If there are two possible outcomes, it is worse to bring about the outcome with a smaller total amount of happiness.

But, this is a Utilitarian principle. While it is true that, if we think the right thing to do is produce the greatest amount of happiness, then Depletion would be worse than Conservation. But, presumably most of us (especially those of us who reject Utilitarianism) think it is wrong for some other reason. For instance, because it harms someone. Furthermore, part of the reason that the total amount of happiness that results from Depletion is smaller than the amount that results from Conservation is that, if we deplete, there will be FEWER PEOPLE. So, in many cases, the action that results in the most happiness is one that creates the greatest number of people. But, then, if we are obligated to maximize happiness, perhaps we are obligated to procreate as much as possible. Most of us think that we do NOT have a moral obligation to procreate, however.

How do we explain these intuitions? What do you think?