

The Non-Identity Problem

The Non-Identity Problem will potentially affect the verdict about what our moral obligations are regarding climate change. In order to understand this problem, we first 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. 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, just as **spatial** distance is not morally relevant, then perhaps **temporal** distance is not relevant either. 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:

- Unhealthy 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 experience health problems that will cause their premature death at the age of 40. 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, since it would be inconvenient, she keeps taking the birth-defect-causing medication and decides to conceive now anyway. Her child experiences health problems and dies at 40.

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 suffered from the health complications.

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 unhealthy child would not have existed AT ALL if the woman had waited another month to conceive. So, the two alternatives for the unhealthy child are either (a) a good life that is cut short, or (b) NO LIFE AT ALL. Surely a good life that is cut short 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? Answering this question is the difficulty posed by The Non-Identity Problem.

A Problem for Climate Change

Why might this problem affect our decisions about climate change? Consider:

Conservation vs. Depletion: Global leaders 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" (i.e., over-consume) as much as possible, but the future generations will live poorer lives because we will have depleted all of the resources.

Note that choice (1) will eventually result in completely different populations than choice (2)—within a time frame of no more than 200 years. (As Parfit notes, "[It may help to think about this question: how many of us could truly claim, 'Even if railways and motor cars had never been invented, I would still have been born'?](#)")

So, should we conserve our resources or deplete them? The common objection to depletion has been that, by depleting, we **harm** the future generations; i.e., we make their lives **worse** than they would have been, had we conserved and taken steps to mitigate climate change. But notice that, if we deplete, it will not be bad for anyone in particular. The future generations who live their mediocre lives in a world ravished by climate change will have no complaint against US (in the present) 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 their lives are good ones—i.e., lives 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).

We can imagine asking them, "Would you rather be alive in a world ruined by climate change, or never have existed at all?" And, assuming that their lives will still be of SOME good to them, it seems that they would prefer the former. But, the implication is that they would prefer that we in the present DEplete all of our resources, rather than conserve them. And, certainly, it would be false to say that we have HARMED them (i.e., made their lives WORSE than they would have been) by depleting. For, if we had NOT depleted, they would not have lived at all (rather, some other people would have).

An argument can be stated as follows:

1. Depletion does not make future generations worse off than they otherwise would have been.
2. An act harms someone if and only if it causes them to be worse off than they otherwise would have been.
3. Therefore, depletion does not harm future generations.
4. Depletion benefits presently existing people, and harms no one.
5. Any action that harms no one, and benefits some, is not wrong.
6. Therefore, depletion is not wrong.

Depleting the resources does not harm future generations, and benefits the present one. But, then, if depletion is not wrong because it HARMS future generations, then why do we think it is wrong to deplete? Answering this question is rather difficult.

On "Harming" and "Wronging"

Our best route would be to either re-define "harm" and reject premise 2, or else keep our definition of harm and reject premise 5.

Redefining 'Harm': We have been using a definition of "harm" that is something like this:

- **Harm:** To make someone worse off than they otherwise would have been.

But, this definition might be problematic. Consider:

- **Broken Nose:** I punch you in the nose. Your nose is broken and bleeding and you are rushed to the hospital. As it turns out, at the hospital, they discover that you have a form of nose cancer. Because it was discovered early, it is treatable and your life is saved. But, had you gone another month without discovering it, you would have died of the cancer.

In this case, by punching you in the nose, have I made you WORSE OFF than you would have otherwise been? No. Rather, it seems that I have made you much BETTER OFF, because ultimately my punch saved your life. You're welcome.

Most people will want to say that I HAVE harmed you by punching you, even if it did NOT ultimately make you worse off than you would have been. Now consider another case:

- **New Restaurant:** You are the owner of a local taco joint. You are earning enough from the profits of your restaurant to make ends meet. But, now, I open another taco restaurant in another part of town. As it turns out, I start to get a lot of business, and some of these customers are ones that would have frequented YOUR restaurant, had I not opened mine. You earn less profit after my restaurant opens, and your life becomes more difficult as it is harder to make ends meet.

Clearly, I have made you worse off than you would have otherwise been in this case. But, have I HARMED you? Perhaps not. What we have just seen are some reasons to think:

- Perhaps you CAN harm someone without making them worse off. (Broken Nose)
- Perhaps making someone worse off does NOT always count as a harm (New Restaurant)

Redefining 'Wrong': Another way to think of it is to say that perhaps I HAVE harmed you in New Restaurant, but I have not WRONGED you (and similarly, perhaps I have NOT harmed you in Broken Nose, though I HAVE wronged you). It does seem that there are many cases where you can do something "wrong" without harming anyone, but only benefitting. For instance, consider some cases:

- Peeping Tom
- Breaking into someone's house and sleeping there (they never find out)
- Lying to someone for their own good
- Saying bad things about someone behind their back

It is possible that you "wrong" someone in each of these cases, even if you do not "harm" them.

In short, either by re-defining "harm" (i.e., rejecting P2) or re-defining "wrong" (i.e., rejecting P5), we might be able to conclude that we DO harm (or wrong) future generations by depleting all of the resources, even if this does not make them "worse off than they otherwise would have been." [But, what ARE these new definitions?]

Parfit's Solution

Derek Parfit suggests the following principle, which denies premise 5:

Individual Utility 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 else 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, here are some worries:

1. In the Unhealthy Child case, we could truthfully say to the unhealthy child, "It would be better if you had never existed." Do we really want to admit that this is true?

Reply: Note that this does not mean that it is BAD for the unhealthy 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. That seems true.

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 unhealthy child*. Rather, what she does is wrong only insofar as we think we are obligated to always bring about the best possible outcome. This is a Utilitarian claim. But, many people find Utilitarianism implausible.

3. What would this principle dictate in cases where we have what Parfit calls "different number choices"? For, in the Unhealthy Child scenario, it is a choice between one child and another child. But, sometimes our choices do not only affect WHO will be born, but HOW MANY people will be born. What should we make of cases where our two options result in very different numbers of people? (If we deplete, the global population in 200 years is sure to be different number than if we had conserved.) How do we assess wrongness in this case?

Reply: Parfit offers a modified 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.

Note that this is now full-blown Utilitarianism. Depletion is wrong because it would not maximize happiness. [*Is this a good solution? Is there another plausible solution?*]