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SOCIAL CHOICE AND NORMATIVE POPULATION THEORY:
A PERSON AFFECTING SOLUTION TO PARFIT'S MERE
ADDITION PARADOX*

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If World War II had never happened, the baby-boomers wouldn't exist. If our parents had made different choices, we would not exist now. Clearly both individual choices, and social policy choices may change the number, constituency, and welfare of future generations. Partha Dasgupta (1988) calls such choices *genesis choices*. A *normative population theory*, if we had one, would be a theory of how such implications of our choices should be taken into account when we are deciding what we ought to do. Unfortunately, the normative population theories that have been developed so far are radically counterintuitive and quite difficult to believe. Many common moral principles have paradoxical and repugnant implications when we apply them to *genesis choices*.

In this paper I consider a few of the many problems that have frustrated population theorists. I argue that a plausible consequentialist population theory can be developed from principles that lie behind common sense moral judgments about individual procreative choice. Like its competitors, the resultant theory has some counterintuitive implications, some of which I investigate here. But I believe that its implications are less difficult to accept than those of competing theories. Further, these implications may be mitigated if this consequentialist population theory is supplemented with a theory of rights that constrains the pursuit of a consequentialist population optimum. The resultant theory therefore should be of interest to consequentialists and nonconsequentialists alike.

1. TWO KINDS OF UTILITARIANISM AND THE PERSON AFFECTING PRINCIPLE

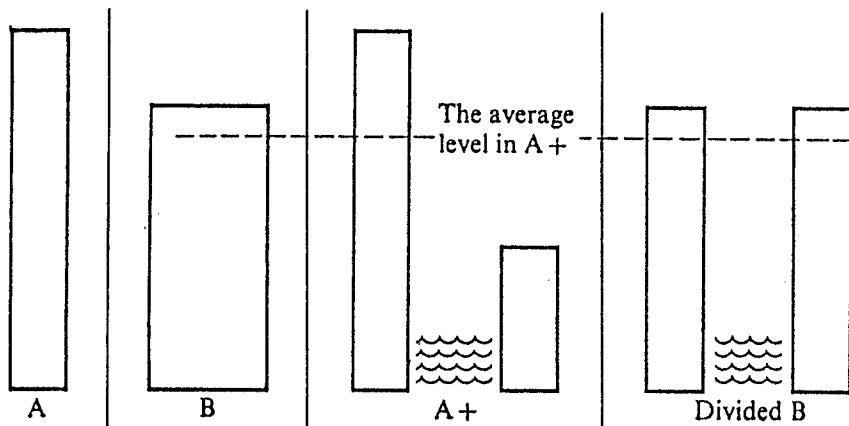
Normative population theory has a brief history. Henry Sidgwick (1981/1907) recognized a century ago that utilitarianism faced certain difficulties when applied to future populations. According to total utilitarianism, the total surplus of happiness over misery should be as high as possible. To find this total, we simply add the utility levels of everyone together in one aggregate value. According to average utilitarianism, the average surplus of happiness over misery should be as high as possible. To find the average utility level, the total level is simply divided by the number of persons. Both versions of utilitarianism face daunting problems: total utilitarianism would force us to accept the “Repugnant Conclusion” that for any finite population A of people who are all very well off, there is some much larger population B of people, all of whom have lives that are scarcely worth living, such that B is better than A because the sum total of utility is greater (Parfit, 1982). The average view implies that it would be wrong to have a child whose welfare level would be below the average level, no matter how high the average welfare level happens to be. The better off others are, the less likely it will be that having a child would be permissible. On the impersonal and ahistorical version of this view, the decision will depend also on how well off the ancient Greeks happened to be and how their past bliss affects the current average level. The implications and relative merits of these theories have been investigated thoroughly (McMahan, 1981; Parfit, 1982; Hurka, 1983; Broome, 1992). Only with reluctance could a thoughtful person accept either one.¹

Following an insight of Jan Narveson (1973), Peter Singer (1973) has suggested that the best formulation of the utilitarian view should focus on benefiting persons who exist, or who will exist regardless of our choices, but should not place value on bringing additional happy persons into existence. Singer and Narveson incorporate a principle that values making people happy, but which does not place value on making happy people by bringing them into existence. Following Parfit (1982), we will call this principle the ‘person-affecting principle’ [PAP]. Rejecting the PAP would be costly. It is this principle that lies behind the common judgment that people are not doing something wrong when they choose not to have a child who would

be happy. Rejection of the person-affecting principle seems to commit us to the judgment that current well-being should, under some circumstances, be sacrificed for the sake of adding new people to the world. This suggests a fairly radical strategy for dealing with current human destitution and misery: there would be no need to provide aid and succor to those who are needy and miserable if we could instead counterbalance their misery and destitution by bringing more happy people into existence. Since it is absurd to regard this as a reasonable way to address such problems, we should accept a person-affecting principle and a normative theory of population that is consistent with such a principle, unless we have very good reasons for rejecting it. Unfortunately, the PAP is almost as difficult to accept as it is to reject. This principle is the source of some of the paradox and seeming incoherence of our moral theories when we apply them to population choice.²

2. THE ‘MERE ADDITION’ PARADOX

One of the most perplexing and philosophically appealing puzzles in normative population theory is Parfit’s “Mere Addition Paradox” (Parfit, 1982, pp. 419–441). Parfit’s paradox is easy to generate. Consider the following possible future states of affairs, A, B, A+, and Divided B:



The width of Parfit’s rectangles represents the number of people who exist, while height represents their level of well-being. In A+ and Div. B an uncrossable sea separates two groups, whose numbers

and levels of well-being are represented separately. We arrive at the paradox by considering the relative ‘betterness’ of these alternate possible states of affairs. For example:³

M1) B is worse than A.

Argument: All members of B are worse off than any member of A. If we accept the PAP, then we cannot regard the fact that B has more people than A as a respect in which B is better than A. These are the only morally relevant differences between A and B. So B is worse than A.

M2) A+ is not worse than A.

Argument: The only difference between A and A+ is that in A+ there exist more people, all of whom have lives worth living. It is implausible to suppose that the ‘*mere addition*’ of their relatively happy lives constitutes a net loss, or that they make the overall situation worse or less choiceworthy. But this implies that A+ is not worse than A.

M3) Divided B is just as good as B.

Argument: The only difference between Divided B and B is that in Div. B there are two separate communities. Everyone is equally well off, and the number of people is the same. This division is not morally relevant, so Div. B is as good as B.

M4) Divided B is better than A+.

Argument: In Divided B, the average level of well-being is greater than in A+. If we imagine a gradual transition from A+ to Divided B, we see that the gainers have gained more than the losers have lost, while everyone is still adequately provided for. Those who accept a Rawlsian difference principle may note that such a principle would also favor Divided B over A+, since the worst-off persons in B are better off than the worst-off in A+. Finally, if equality has value, or

inequality disvalue, Divided B has more equality and less inequality than A+. For all of these reasons, Divided B is better than A+.

As long as the “better than” relation follows standard rules of ordering, we should be able to make some inferences from these four propositions. For example:

- M5) B is better than A+ (M3, M4, and substitution of equals.)
- M6) B is not worse than A (M5, M2 and transitivity.)

But M6 contradicts M1. If we like, we can draw out other contradictions in this ordering as well. Parfit shows that our intuitions concerning possible future populations have contradictory implications. This is a serious problem. In fact, we can show that the intuitions which lead us to these contradictions also lead to Parfit’s “Repugnant Conclusion”, that the best state of affairs would be a world in which there were many people, each with a life barely worth living (Parfit, 1982). Which of our intuitions do we drop, and what reason justifies us in relinquishing it? Parfit leaves the discussion in a state of aporia. He claims that he sees no way out of this problem, but that he believes that it will be solved by someone.

3. AN IDEAL CONTRACTARIAN MODEL FOR GENESIS CHOICES

One of the most popular conceptions of social justice is the ideal contractarian conception, whose most prominent advocates are Rawls (1971) and Harsanyi (1982). Perhaps Parfit’s problem can be solved by conceiving the choice among possible future situations from the ideal contractarian perspective: consider the choice among these different options from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ which conceals from us specific properties of our own identities. For our purposes here, let us consider that this choice is made by an individual person who is interested in maximizing the expectation that her life will be as good as possible. From behind the veil, she knows that she will be some member of the population she chooses, but doesn’t know which one. From this initial position, we would prefer to come into existence in world A than in any of the others. In A, we can be sure that our expected well being will be greater than it would be in any of the other cases. If (following what many believe to be a mistake in Rawls’ model) we stipulate that maximin reasoning should be

used – that from behind the veil of ignorance, we should choose so that the worst possible outcome will be as good as possible – we can conclude further that B and Div. B offer the same prospects, and that either of these is preferable to A+. This seems to be a solution to Parfit's paradox: the reason why it initially seemed that A+ is not worse than A is that we were choosing from the wrong perspective (Cowen, 1989; Wellman, 1992).

But there are serious problems associated with this ideal contractarian response. The first of these problems would lead us to conclude that the ideal contractarian solution may be incoherent. As the number of future persons considered stretches into the more distant future, parties to the original position associate less and less with each one. If the number approaches infinity as we take into account more distant futures, the degree of concern associated with each person's good approaches zero. Worse, the degree of concern for any finite subset of the set of all future persons also approaches zero. Even if the number of future persons is finite, the degree of concern associated with any particular individual is likely to be infinitesimal. A second problem is that the ideal contractarian solution seems to place the wrong emphasis on numbers: given a choice between a world in which 10 people are suffering terribly, with lives worse than death, and a world of 10 billion in the same terrible situation, it seems odd that the ideal contractual solution is indifferent between them (Parfit, 1982, p. 393). Surely a world in which many suffer is worse than a world in which only a few suffer. Unless these problems can be explained or solved, it would be premature to accept the ideal contractual solution.⁴

4. PERSON-AFFECTING PRINCIPLES FOR GENESIS CHOICES

Contractarian and classical utilitarian theories of population have run into grave difficulties. I suggest that a more acceptable account of population choice is implicit in a set of moral judgments that are both widely accepted and philosophically defensible. I will argue that common sense principles that we accept in the context of individual procreative choices can be generalized to provide an acceptable theory of population and policy choice. Many philosophers throughout history have claimed to be the defenders of common sense, with

varied success. But in moral philosophy, common sense intuitions and principles are often the source of problems – especially when they are taken from their common sense home, and applied more generally to unusual domains. Population choice is a novel area for ethical investigation, so it is not surprising that many standard moral theories lead to paradox when applied in this area. Defense of a population theory must therefore show more than that it comports well with common sense judgments, and analysis ultimately may lead us to conclude that common sense moral principles are hopelessly muddled. Final judgment must come after we have subjected common sense principles to philosophical analysis, and even if they survive analysis, we should be open to the possibility that further investigation may show them to be unacceptable.

Still, our common sense moral judgments constitute a legitimate starting point for moral reflection, and we should grant them some initial presumptive credibility. It is a strike against the standard theories, therefore, that they come in such sharp contrast with common sense. Imagine visiting a fertility counsellor who accepts either the total or average utilitarian view: The total utilitarian counsellor would recommend that you should continue to have as many children as possible unless (i) your prospective child would be so badly off that the child would herself be indifferent between life and death – the point of zero utility, or (ii) until the aggregate benefits of your child's existence are outweighed by the cost the child's existence would place on others. The average utilitarian counsellor would tell you that it would be wrong to have a child unless your child's welfare would be above the utilitarian average, no matter how high the average happened to be. The average utilitarian fertility counsellor would find it important to take into account how happy the ancient Greeks were, since their happiness needs to be taken into account in determining the impersonal average utility. But these views are silly. In deciding whether to have a child, it surely is relevant to consider costs that one's child might impose on others – especially in an overpopulated world. It also may be relevant to consider whether one can expect to give one's child a good start in life. But it would be silly to consider whether one's child will raise or lower the average or total utility level. I suspect that a sensible person would ignore the advice of both the total

and the average utilitarian fertility counsellor. Perhaps the theories these counsellors represent eventually will be ignored by population theorists as well. Common sense supports a quite different principle for advising prospective parents. Abstracting, for the moment, from consideration of the costs that might be imposed on others by adding an additional person to the world, consider the problem solely in terms of the welfare of the child one might have. If one can be assured that the existence of one's child will not impose undue costs on others, common sense recommends the following principle:

- P1: It is morally impermissible to have a child if one's child would have no reasonable expectation, or a poor expectation, of having a decent life.

At the individual level, this explains why it is wrong to have children if one cannot provide them with an adequate start in life. If one cannot provide a good start for one's child, then *for the sake of the miserable child one might have*, one should wait, or forbear from having children altogether. There is an odd character to this claim, since it implies that the choice not to have a child is done for the sake of a person who will never exist if the choice is properly made. This seems to violate the common assumption that we cannot do anything for the sake of people who will never exist! But as Jefferson McMahan notes, "population theory is an area in which we may expect the collapse of certain standard assumptions."⁵ The central intuition behind P1 was accepted by John Stewart Mill, who wrote:

Hardly anyone . . . will deny that it is one of the most sacred duties of the parents . . . after summoning a human being into the world, to give to that being an education fitting him to perform his part well in life toward others and toward himself. (...) [T]o bring a child into existence without fair prospect of being able, not only to provide food for its body, but instruction and training for its mind is a moral crime, both against the unfortunate offspring and against society . . . (Mill, 1979/1859, p. 104)

Mill's judgment is widely shared, and I believe well-founded. At the individual level, it explains why it is wrong to have children if one cannot provide for them. However, most people would agree that if one can be reasonably confident about giving a child a good start in life, it would be morally permissible to have a child. This common view clashes sharply with the advice of the standard util-

itarian theories. We should be hesitant to relinquish this judgment unless analysis shows it to be unacceptable. Under what conditions is it morally permissible to choose to bring a child into the world? Our common sense moral understandings include the judgment that:

- P2: It is morally permissible to have a child if one's child would have a reasonable expectation of having a decent life.

If one can provide one's prospective child with a good start and reasonable expectations, then P2 implies that having children is permissible. P2 leaves the choice unconstrained in such circumstances: having a child is permissible, but not obligatory or even 'good' from an impersonal perspective. Certainly no one *else* has any business, from the moral point of view, telling people in such a situation that they *ought* or *ought not* to have a child. This implication contrasts sharply with the total and average utilitarian views, which assign a moral obligation to have children, whenever doing so would increase the impersonal aims these theories assign. However, P1 and P2 reflect the structure and the evaluation implications of the PAP, which is neutral about bringing well-off persons into existence, but which implies that it is worse to increase misery by causing the existence of miserable and destitute persons.

While P1 and P2 embody common sense judgments about how private procreative choices should be made, they do not constitute a normative population theory. Such a theory should tell us how the prospect of increasing or decreasing population should be taken into account when social policy is likely to influence population growth or decline. To develop such a theory, we begin by generalizing P1 and P2 into *prima facie* principles for policy choice:

- P3: Social choices are morally impermissible if they will result unnecessarily in the existence of persons who will have no reasonable expectation of living a decent life.
- P4: Social choices are morally permissible even if they will result unnecessarily in the existence of additional persons, provided that those who come to exist as a result of such choices will have a reasonable expectations of living decent lives.

The wording of these principles may seem odd, since social policy choices do not bring persons into existence in the direct way that individual procreative choices sometimes do. But it is clear that social policy choices sometimes affect population and welfare, and P3 and P4 purport to provide guidance as to how these factors should be taken into account. Like P1 and P2, these principles reflect the person affecting principle, which approves of benefiting people who exist, but is neutral about causing well-off people to exist. But if we are optimistic about the goodness of human beings, perhaps we feel that it may even be a good thing to bring into existence additional un-deprived persons, at least when this can be done without increasing misery and destitution. Overpopulation is objectionable when it causes poverty and suffering, not merely because it involves bringing an excessive number of persons into existence. In such circumstances, however, it is permissible to choose not to increase overall population, even if the lives of those who would otherwise exist would be good lives, and even if their existence would involve no excess costs to others. According to these principles, it is wrong to increase misery by bringing destitute people into existence. But they imply nothing about whether it would be good to increase bliss by increasing the number of well-off persons.

P3 and P4 may not be easy to apply, since it is difficult to predict what people's lives are likely to be like, and since large scale policy choices are likely to have widespread and mixed effects. P5 captures the main insights in P3 and P4, in terms of a broader, unified aim:

- P5: When policy choices will influence population, they should be guided by an aim to minimize the number of persons who have no reasonable expectation of living a decent life.

This principle still incorporates a central intuition behind the PAP, since it places no positive value on bringing well-off people into existence, but places disvalue on bringing miserable people into existence. P5 also adds consideration of the costs or benefits to others that may result from bringing more people into existence: if a certain policy would bring more well-off persons into existence, but their existence would emiserate others who would otherwise have been well enough off, then P5 will prohibit that policy whenever there

are alternatives that would result in fewer people overall whose life expectations are unacceptably low. Since such considerations are morally relevant, this is an appropriate addition.

But P5 is subject to another serious objection since it takes only the number of deprived persons into account, and it entirely ignores differences in the seriousness of their deprivation or the depth of their misery. As it stands, P5 implies that a world with 99 persons who are woefully deprived and tortuously miserable is better than a world with 100 persons who are only moderately deprived and miserable.⁶ If this implication is unacceptable, then we should revise P5 so that it embodies a purer form of negative utilitarianism:

- P6: Population choices should be guided by an aim to minimize suffering and deprivation.⁷

When policy choices are likely to determine the number and constituency of future generations, P6 instructs us to minimize the number of miserable and destitute persons unless deeper overall misery and deprivation can be avoided by increasing their number. The further development of P6 into a full theory of population choice would require the development of a schedule for weighing the number of persons against the depth of their suffering and deprivation.

Unlike alternative consequentialist principles for population choice, P6 focuses on the minimization of misery and deprivation rather than on the maximization of bliss. Mill and many other utilitarians assume that the maximization of happiness naturally will imply the minimization of misery – both aims typically are included in the utilitarian credo. But the aim of minimizing misery and deprivation often will imply quite different choices from the aim to maximize happiness. This is clearest in the context of population choice, where the aim of maximizing happiness may imply that we should bring more happy persons into existence in order to increase the utilitarian total or average. A consequentialism focused on the minimization of misery will not allow us to address the problem of current suffering by bringing into existence additional persons whose happiness will provide a utilitarian counterweight. As long as people are not miserable or deprived, P6 does not imply any obligation to increase impersonal bliss.

Why have utilitarians focused on the maximization of happiness, positive utilitarianism, as we might call it, rather than on negative utilitarianism and the minimization of misery? The most obvious explanation is that formal utilitarian models cannot make sense of the distinction between these two types of utilitarianism. On standard models, a starving child's desperate need for rice and a well-fed yuppie's preference for theatre tickets are simply preferences – there is no meaningful distinction to be made between them except perhaps that the former is more intense. Standard models imply that if there are enough bored yuppies who want to attend the theatre, and if the cost of providing them with theatre tickets is the same as the cost of providing a hungry child with adequate nutrition, then we should be morally indifferent between providing food for the hungry or providing theatre tickets to the bored.⁸

Such implications are, I hope, difficult to accept. A starving child's desperate need for food is not comparable to a mere preference to see a play, and a good normative theory should be able to explain why. A consequentialism that aims to minimize misery rather than maximizing bliss may avoid the implication that a hungry child's "preference" for rice and a bored yuppie's "preference" for theatre tickets are on a par. To accomplish this, it must be shown that the boredom of yuppies is not a "bad" comparable to the badness of the hunger of deprived, starving children. If bored yuppies are neither deprived nor miserable in any morally significant sense, then P6 does not imply that their desire for theatre tickets should be a matter for general concern. We need to explain why it is not appropriate to compare the needs of the desperate with the preferences of those who are already well-off. P6 allows us to ignore the interest that well-off people have in being even better-off – we can leave such people to make their own decisions and to take care of themselves. Certainly there is no need to tailor social policy in order to make them more blissful. But how miserable and destitute must people be before they merit our attention? What sorts of lives are "decent"?

To cut off the comparison between the needs of hungry children and the whims of bored yuppies and to discover the application conditions for P6, we need to be able to identify a standard of "critical level" such that people whose lives do not meet this standard are identifiable as deprived. One possible "critical level" is the point

that many utilitarians have used to represent zero utility: the point at which a person is so badly off that she is indifferent between life and death. But a person may be miserable and deprived without being indifferent between life and death. The point at which one is indifferent between life and death is an extreme and cannot be the critical level we need.⁹

Alternatively, we might look for a critical level in current moral and political theory. According to some theories, ‘utility’, as understood by economists and represented in the rectangles that generate Parfit’s paradox, is only one morally significant dimension of persons. According to alternative accounts, what is important about persons’ welfare is their capacity to achieve a state of autonomy (Rawls, 1971), possession of basic resources (Dworkin, 1981), the ability to exercise certain basic human capabilities (Sen, 1985, 1990), or to function in basic, essential human ways (Nussbaum, 1992), whether basic needs are satisfied (discussed in Crocker, 1992), or more generally their ability to live a decent life on whatever conception of ‘decent life’ they may autonomously choose (Mill, 1979). It is unlikely that we will find an uncontroversial way to identify the threshold that divides those who have a reasonable expectation of a decent life from those who do not. Some of these conditions may be material resources, others may be social resources or liberties. To some extent, these conditions will vary from society to society, since different things are needed to live decently in different social circumstances. Because different people surely have different conceptions of what sorts of lives qualify as decent, it seems unlikely that we will ever approach anything like unanimous agreement about this issue.¹⁰ If any moral concepts are essentially contestable, the concept of a ‘decent life’ should be among them.

Even if we cannot achieve unanimity on this question, it may be possible to reach considerable agreement about the circumstances that would make it practically impossible to achieve any reasonable conception of a decent life. It is uncontroversial to assert that a child who lacks adequate nutrition, shelter, the social resources of other persons, and at least minimal opportunities for self-development lacks the necessary resources for the achievement of a decent human life. Such minimal agreement is all that we need to put a principle like P6 to work. Starting with agreement on such extreme cases, we

may hope to extend agreement further. If the concept of a decent human life is essentially contestable, then any theory that offers a critical level of this sort must be open to later revision. In practice, we cannot guarantee that future generations will be happy, though perhaps we can see to it that we do not use up the resources we know they will need. So while P6 focuses on “suffering and deprivation,” actual choices are likely to focus more closely on resources and the conditions of life.

Since the negative utilitarian view articulated in P6 incorporates a “critical level” represented by the concept of a decent life, the theory outlined here might be called *negative critical level utilitarianism* [NCLU].

5. NEGATIVE CRITICAL LEVEL UTILITARIANISM AND POPULATION CHOICE

Any person-affecting population theory will have a structure relevantly similar to NCLU, since person affecting theories will place no value on bringing happy people into existence, but will place disvalue on bringing miserable people into existence. It is clear that NCLU has quite different implications from alternative consequentialist population theories. Unlike the total view, NCLU places no positive value on the existence of additional happy persons.¹¹ Unlike the average view, NCLU does not imply that the welfare of other people or of the ancient Greeks is a relevant consideration for people who are considering whether or not they should increase population. Unlike alternative theories, NCLU prohibits purchasing bliss for those who are already well-off at the price of deeper misery for the few.

If NCLU is to provide a decision guide for policy choice, as a normative population theory is supposed to do, then it must have implications for the choice Parfit (1982) has presented in the mere addition paradox. In this case, NCLU allows any of the options Parfit recommends, provided only that the worst-off people in the various alternatives have what is necessary for the achievement of a decent life. So as it stands, NCLU implies, or at least permits the choices that lead to a version of Parfit’s repugnant conclusion: it is permissible to bring into existence an indefinite number of persons,

provided only that those who come into existence will be sufficiently well-off. But if life at the critical level is good enough, then perhaps this is not a repugnant version of the repugnant conclusion. What made Parfit's repugnant conclusion seem repugnant was that Parfit's "critical level" is the level at which individuals have lives that are barely worth living. But lives that are barely worth living must be fairly miserable, and if our aim is to minimize misery, then we should avoid bringing miserable people into existence.

Some people will be dissatisfied with this "solution" for Parfit's paradox, since it sidesteps the issue rather than actually telling us which of Parfit's options is best. In fact, there will be many situations for which satisfaction of NCLU will not be sufficient to determine a single best choice. But a normative population theory need not always identify a single best option, but only to provide a ranking of available alternatives into indifference classes. If many alternatives pass the test articulated in NCLU, then from the perspective of population theory it is permissible to choose any one of them. We may have other norms that can help us to rank further or constrain choice among the remaining alternatives: NCLU is intended to be a first principle, not a complete theory of policy choice. However, to satisfy the core of the person affecting principle, NCLU must be satisfied first, before other selection norms are brought into play.

There is a more serious objection that may be raised against a view like the one I have outlined here. It might turn out that the best way to minimize suffering and deprivation in future generations would be to see to it that there will be no future generations at all. The principle defended here places no value on the existence of persons *per se*, but only *disvalue* on suffering and want. Some people will be dissatisfied with these implications, and it is easy to see why. But this implication flows naturally from the PAP, which places no positive value on the existence of persons *per se*. This feature of NCLU may be counterintuitive, but it may be less counterintuitive than the notion that we should address the problem of current suffering and want by bringing into existence additional happy people. If we reject the PAP, we are forced to accept the latter. Unless we reject the PAP, we must accept the implication that the continuation of human life has no value independent of the value to those who exist.

Another serious problem looms: it might occur to someone that the best way to minimize current suffering and deprivation would be to quietly, secretly, and painlessly kill off all of those who are miserable and needy. Die hard utilitarians could argue that we rarely face such a policy choice, and that anyway there are excellent utilitarian reasons for avoiding such a policy, since people would find out about it and become even more miserable and fearful. A more direct way to address this problem would be to incorporate a theory of rights, stipulating that in general, policy makers simply have no right to make decisions about whether the lives of others are worth living, or whether they should live or die. Since it is clear that policy makers have no right to kill off the miserable and destitute, this response gains support from our moral intuitions. It also gains support from the person-affecting principle itself: the PAP places value on benefiting people who are badly off, but places no value on increasing or decreasing given amounts of impersonally quantified well-being or misery. Person-affecting moral theories imply that the appropriate response to current suffering is to provide those who suffer with what they so desperately need. The aim of “minimizing misery” is not an impersonal aim which has value independent of its value to those particular persons who are benefited. And killing a person off is usually a poor way to provide her with a benefit.

I cannot claim to have provided a full defense of negative critical level utilitarianism as a normative theory for population choice. To do that, it will be necessary to compare the relative strengths and weaknesses of NCLU against alternative theories. However, I hope that I have shown some of the differences between NCLU and alternative theories and provided a defense of NCLU as a plausible contender. In a short paper, I cannot expect more.

Appendix: On the supposed inconsistency of the person-affecting principle [PAP]:

John Broome (1992, 1994a) has argued that the person-affecting principle is inconsistent, and that we should reluctantly abandon it. In this brief appendix, I present a version of Broome’s argument and a brief response. Consider a choice among the following alternatives:

$$S1: (-5, -5) \quad S2: (-5, -5, \alpha) \quad S3: (-5, -5, +6)$$

The vectors above represent possible states of affairs. Positions within the vectors represent persons, and the numbers that occupy those positions represent their levels of well-being. We stipulate that α represents the critical level, and that positive and negative numbers represent, respectively, comparative levels of well-being above α , or disvalue below α . So S2, for example, contains two miserable people who are below the critical level, and one person who is just at the critical level. According to the PAP, (i) S1 and S2 are equally good since the PAP places no value on adding additional happy people to the world. For the same reason, the PAP implies that (ii) S1 and S3 are equally good. Since the existence of an additional happy person does not make a state of affairs superior, the PAP implies that (iii) S3 is not better than S1. But since the third person is better-off in S2 than in S3, and since the PAP implies that it is better when those who would exist anyway are better off, the PAP implies that (iv) S2 is better than S3. But this gives an intransitive ordering on states of affairs: if S3 is better than S2, then it is better than any alternative that is equally as good as S2. So (v) S3 is better than S1. Since the PAP implies that (iii) S3 is not better than S1, and also that (v) S3 is better than S1, Broome concludes that the PAP is inconsistent.

Negative critical level utilitarianism avoids this inconsistency by refining the person-affecting principle. NCLU implies that S1, S2, and S3 are all equally acceptable since they all contain the same amount of misery for those who are below the critical level. But S3 is clearly better for person 3 than S2 – in S2 she barely has the critical level, so while she's not miserable, she's not very well-off either. In S3 she is much better-off. It seems, then, that NCLU diverges from the PAP in this case, and that the PAP carries with it a strong utilitarian intuition: the pareto principle. According to the pareto principle, if S3 is better for someone, and worse for no one, then S3 is better than S2.

However, NCLU need not abandon the pareto principle. Instead, it can recommend that principle (or others) as an additional norm for ordering options that pass the test articulated in P6. We might, for example, stipulate that pareto-dominated outcomes like S2 are worse than outcomes that are not pareto-dominated, like S1 and S3. This does, however, imply that the minimization of suffering has lexical priority over these other goals, since they can be taken into account

only after P6 has been applied. This lexical feature has implications that some will find counterintuitive: suppose we want to compare two possible future states of the world. The first contains six-billion-and-one people all of whom are barely at the critical level. The second contains six-billion people who are all extremely well-off, and one person who is below the critical level by an arbitrarily small amount. NCLU assigns a higher value to the first world than it does to the second. This is because NCLU prohibits purchasing the bliss of the adequately well-off at the price of even a tiny increase in the misery of the few.

Some people will find such an implication counterintuitive. NCLU is thus not sharply distinguished from alternative population theories, since analysis shows that it too has implications that some people will find difficult to swallow. However, this implication is not as repugnant as those of non-person-affecting views. In particular, non-person-affecting alternatives all imply that we can address the problem of current misery and destitution by ignoring those who suffer, if only we can bring into existence hordes of blissful persons so that the miserable will be proportionally few. Alternative theories that have this implication are much worse-off than NCLU.

NOTES

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¹ Yew-Kwang Ng, who is a thoughtful and enthusiastic defender of the Total View, is an exception to this general statement. See Ng, (1989a, b).

² Broome (1992) and (1994) argues that the PAP is ultimately incoherent, and reluctantly rejects it. For Broome's argument and a response, see the Appendix to this paper.

³ Parfit's actual arguments are somewhat different, but cannot be presented as briefly. Any readers who are unconvinced by the arguments I offer here should refer directly to Parfit.

⁴ According to Cowen (1989), parties to the initial position choice should imagine themselves consecutively living the life of each person who will exist. But Blackorby and Donaldson (1991) show that Cowen's solution implies a version of the repugnant conclusion.

⁵ McMahan (1981), p. 125.

⁶ This example was suggested to me by John Broome in correspondence.

⁷ Fred Feldman recommends a desert-adjusted model that distinguishes between

deserved and undeserved suffering. Those who accept Feldman's argument might accept a further revision of P6 which we could call P6*: Population choices should be guided by an aim to minimize *undeserved* suffering and deprivation. See Feldman (1995).

⁸ The example is taken from Cooter and Rappoport (1984), p. 519.

⁹ Dasgupta (1994) also argues that it is inappropriate to set the zero-utility level at the point at which people are indifferent between life and death.

¹⁰ Martha Nussbaum (1992) argues that any account of what is necessary to live a fully human life must be tentative and open to revision.

¹¹ This also distinguishes NCLU from Blackorby and Donaldson's critical level utilitarian view (1984), from Ng's number-dampened utilitarian view (1989a), and from Dasgupta's Pareto-Plus principle (1994).

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