

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST THE PERSON-AFFECTING  
VIEW OF WRONGNESS

by

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## Abstract

Bailey, Jeannine Marie (M.A., Philosophy)  
An Argument Against the Person-affecting View of Wrongness  
Thesis directed by Associate Professor Alastair Norcross

An act is usually thought of as wrong only if it harms someone and to harm someone is, roughly speaking, to make her worse off. However, the view that an act is wrong only if it harms some particular individual restricts us to a person-affecting view about wrongness. If an act is wrong that does not make any individual worse off, this wrongness cannot be explained in terms of person-affecting consequences. I want to propose that an action can be wrong even if no particular individual is harmed by that act. This argument relies on the idea that an action can be wrong because of the impersonal effects it has. It is the goal of this paper to show that not only is this a plausible view about wrongness, but it is the correct view. On this view, there can be wrongness in the harm caused by diminishing the overall value in the world or by making the world a worse place than it otherwise would have been. One way to demonstrate that an action can be wrong without being wrong for anyone in particular is by referring to Derek Parfit's Non-identity Problem. In these cases, the only way to explain the wrongness is by appealing to a notion of impersonal harm. These acts are wrong because they do not maximize the overall expected value in the world.

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## I. Introduction

Can an act be wrong without wronging someone? It is often claimed that an act is right or wrong only if it is right or wrong for someone. This is known as the person-affecting view. Such an account of wrongness is common in ordinary thought. However, I want to defend the view that an action can be wrong even if it is wrong for no particular person. Although this is not a reigning view about the wrongness of actions, I think it can be shown that there is a sense in which an action can be wrong even if that action does not wrong anyone. Whereas acts are generally said to be wrong due to the effects they have on particular people, this argument relies on the idea that an action can be wrong because of the impersonal effects it has. According to this view, an outcome can be better or worse even if it is better or worse for no one. Further, I want to propose that an action can be wrong even if no particular individual is harmed by that act. In what follows, I will set out this view and provide examples to defend the possibility that an action can be wrong that does not wrong anyone in particular.

Since the non-identity problem is the source of this tension, I will begin by setting out this problem. I will then set out some popular solutions to this problem, which do not rely on a rejection of the person-affecting view, and explain why I think these solutions fail. Thirdly, I will present some principles we may appeal to in order to explain the badness in certain types of actions. Though these principles do not by themselves explain why acts like these are wrong, they are a starting point. I will then advance my own, stronger view which holds that not only are such acts bad, they are wrong. Finally, after presenting another example, the Risky policy case, I will discuss objections to my view and what it implies about our duties to future generations.

## II. The Non-Identity Problem

One way to demonstrate that an action can wrong without being wrong for anyone in particular is by referring to Derek Parfit's argument known as the non-identity problem.<sup>1</sup> In order to demonstrate this argument, I want to put forth two example cases. First consider:

A young woman, Abbey, is pregnant. She sees a doctor who tells her that her baby will be born blind unless she undergoes a course of treatment. The treatment consists of taking a small pill everyday for one month. If Abbey takes the pills as directed, it will cure her child's blindness. The pill that will cure her child's blindness is fully covered by her insurance, has no side effects, and is easy to swallow. Despite this, Abbey decides not to take the pill. Nine months later she gives birth to a blind child named Steven.

Now consider one version of the non-identity problem, which goes as follows:

A young woman, Wilma, has decided to conceive a child. Before conceiving, Wilma sees a doctor about her decision and is informed that if she conceives now, she will give birth to a child who is blind. Although a child with this disability will have a life that is worth living, the disability will impact the child's life in a significant way. However, the doctor informs her that if she takes a pill for one month, she can then conceive a child that will not have this disability. The pill has no harmful side effects, it is easy to consume, and it is covered by her medical insurance. Despite this, Wilma decides that taking the pill for a month is too inconvenient. She does not accept the treatment and nine months later Wilma gives birth to a blind child named Pebbles.<sup>2</sup>

Whereas in the first example, Abbey's decision will not affect the identity of her child, Wilma's decision will affect who her child will be. Abbey's act was wrong because it harmed her child Steven. The same cannot be said of Wilma's act. Though the most common intuition in this case is that Wilma has done something wrong, most people want to say that her act was

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 359.

<sup>2</sup> David Boonin is responsible for this version of the example.

wrong because it wronged her child, Pebbles. As Parfit shows, this intuition is mistaken. Because of certain facts about our actual reproductive systems, if Wilma had waited a month before she conceived, she would have given birth to a different child. Wilma's act did not wrong Pebbles, because if she had chosen to take the pills, the blind child would have never been born. Because we think the life of a person who is blind is a life worth living, we do not think this life is worse for her than if she had never existed. Therefore, Wilma did not harm Pebbles by bringing her into existence.<sup>3</sup> As Parfit contends, the objection to Wilma's decision cannot be that it was worse for her child. Before the child is born we can make this claim in the sense that "her child" refers to any child that Wilma might have. However, once the child is born, it becomes clear that her decision was not worse for her child. Wilma could not have given this child a better start in life.<sup>4</sup> Pebbles was given the only start that was possible for her. Thus, the claim that Wilma's decision to conceive immediately was worse for her child cannot explain our objection to her decision. Initially it seems as though Abbey's and Wilma's acts were wrong for the same reason. However, if the reason in the already pregnant case is that the mother's refusal to take the pill harms her child, that does not apply to the Wilma and Pebbles case.

Though we have the intuition that Wilma's act (the act of choosing to conceive now rather than to take the pills before conceiving) was wrong, the non-identity problem makes it very difficult to explain why we think her act was wrong. The following is a formulation of the argument that Wilma's act was not wrong:

- P1) Wilma's act does not make Pebbles worse off than she would otherwise have been.
- P2) If A's act harms B, then it makes B worse off than B would otherwise have been.
- C1) Wilma's act of conceiving Pebbles does not harm Pebbles.
- P3) Wilma's act of conceiving Pebbles does not harm anyone else.

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<sup>3</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 359.

<sup>4</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 359-360.

- C2) Wilma's act of conceiving Pebbles does not harm anyone.
- P4) If an act does not harm anyone, then the act does not wrong anyone.
- C3) Wilma's act of conceiving Pebbles does not wrong anyone.
- P5) If an act does not wrong anyone, then the act is not wrong.
- C4) Wilma's act of conceiving Pebbles is not wrong.<sup>5</sup>

One might claim that the first premise is incoherent because it requires us to compare existence with non-existence. However, we often make this comparison. For example, if you can either die now or be on fire and die in agony ten minutes later, most people would say it would be better for you to die now. This is known as the "better off dead case." Yet, it seems strange to say that non-existence would be worse for A than existence because nothing can be worse for A if A does not exist. Even if premise one is incoherent, however, we might still be stuck with premise 2 because if premise 1 is incoherent, then Pebbles is not harmed.

Premise 2 assumes a common sense account of harm. Again, it states that if A's act harms B, then it makes B worse off than B would otherwise have been. This account of harm is known as the Counterfactual Comparative Account of harm. In order to reject premise 2, one must show that there is a morally relevant sense in which harming someone does not make them worse off and that that is the sense in which Wilma harms Pebbles.

There are some alternatives to this account of harm. One is known as the Temporal Comparative Account. On this account, if A's act harms B, then A's act makes B worse off than B was before A's act. In most temporal cases, the temporal account gets it right as often as the counterfactual account gets it right. The temporal account even gets the right answers in some case in which the counterfactual account gets the wrong answers. For instance, consider the "over determination case." Thug 1 and thug 2 are both sent to kill you. If thug 1 does not kill you, then thug 2 definitely will. Let us say that thug 1 kills you. Are you worse off? According

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<sup>5</sup> David Boonin is responsible for this formulation.

to the Temporal Account, you are. However, on the Counterfactual Account, the answer must be no because thug 2 would have killed you anyway (stipulating that thug 2 kills you at the same time and in the same way). There are also cases in which the Counterfactual Account is better than the Temporal Account. Say, for example, that you are sick and that someone is bringing you medication. When the person arrives with the medication, I lock the door. In this case, according to the Temporal Account, I did not harm you because I did not make you worse off than you were before I locked the door. However, I did make you worse off than you would otherwise have been. Therefore, the Counterfactual Account can account for the harm in this example while the Temporal account cannot. Because the Counterfactual Account gets it right in some cases while the Temporal Comparative account gets the right answers in others, I will stick with the Counterfactual Account for the purpose of my arguments.<sup>6</sup>

Another alternative to the Counterfactual Account of harm is the Comparative/Non-Comparative Hybrid Account. On this account, if A's act harms B, then A's act causes B to suffer a comparative harm.<sup>7</sup> In this case, A's act harms B if A's act stands in a certain relation to B's being harmed. There are two components to this claim: the relation and B's being harmed. B's being harmed is the comparative part of the account. The harm here is comparative in the sense that B is worse off than B would have been if A had not performed the act. On the other hand, the non-comparative comparative part of the view is the harm. Harms are just harms in and of themselves rather than *because* they made you worse than you would otherwise have been. People who hold this view have a sort of list of things that are considered to be harms. If one suffers a harm then they are thereby made worse off than they otherwise

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<sup>6</sup> The alternative accounts of harm are from notes taken in David Boonin's section of the Ethics Pro-seminar.

<sup>7</sup> The relation of causation itself might be comparative. If some version of the counterfactual theory of causation is correct, then causation is itself comparative.

would have been. For instance, pain is a harm even if the situation is such that you would have been worse were you not in that pain. Say you are in 10 units of pain and someone gives you a pain killer that takes away all 10 units of pain and then gives you 5, rather than a pain killer that takes away 5 of the 10 you have. On this view, because you have been harmed by receiving the pain killer (because you have been made to suffer pain), you are thereby made worse off. However, this does not seem to be the case considering that if you had not been made to suffer the harm you would be in 10 rather than 5 units of pain. Thus, you do not seem to have been made worse off than you otherwise would have been.<sup>8</sup> This account does not say anything about what would have happened had A not harmed B. Though A's act may cause B to suffer a comparative harm, this same act might in fact benefit that person or make B better off than B would otherwise have been had A not harmed B. Say for instance that a woman is about to be evicted from her house. However, that day, as she is walking her dog, a man drops a large emerald from the window of a skyscraper near her and gives her a black eye. Let us stipulate that there is no way for her to determine who dropped the gem from the window and therefore she cannot return it. In this case, it seems that though the man's act causes the woman to suffer a harm, since the woman gets to keep the gem, the woman is more than compensated for that harm. Because the act harmed her in one respect (the condition of her eye), but benefited her overall, it seems that the correct view of harm should account for B's state before the harmful act takes place.

Finally, there is the Non-Comparative account of harm, which can be attributed to Elizabeth Harman. On this account, A's act harms B if A's act causes B to be in a bad state.

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<sup>8</sup> This would only count as a hybrid account if one has a particular view of causation. If your account of causation holds that causation itself is comparative, then the account is straightforwardly comparative.

This account does not make the claim that A's act harms B if A's act causes B to be in a worse state. Thus, on this view, A's act harms B if A's act causes B to be in a bad state, even if the alternative would be for B to be in a worse state. Harman does not claim that A's harming B is sufficient for making B worse off than B otherwise would have been. Whereas other accounts of harm give necessary conditions, Harman attempts to provide an alternative sufficient condition. According to Harman, you can harm someone by putting that person in a bad state even if that act does not make them worse off than they otherwise would have been. Thus, to make someone worse off is neither sufficient nor necessary for harm. For instance,

A woman is raped, becomes pregnant, and ends up raising the child. The woman is remarkably able to separate the trauma of the rape from her attitude to the child, and they have a normal and healthy parent-child relationship. The woman's life is better, due to the value to her of the relationship with her child, than it would have been if she had not been raped, even taking into account the trauma of the rape. This woman loves her child. She does not wish that she had not been raped, because if she had not been raped, then her child would not exist.<sup>9</sup>

This example is meant to show that the Counterfactual Account of harm is false and the Non-Comparative account is true. In this example, the woman seems to have been made better off than you would otherwise have been, yet harmed. However, there are some problems with Harman's account. Harman's account seems to be caught in a dilemma. Either it is trivial, because the comparative account would reach the same conclusions, or, in cases where there is a difference, Harman's account would have to prefer the choice that would only benefit you rather than the choice that would harm and benefit you even if the choice that both harms and benefits you would leave you better off, which is implausible. Harman's Alternative Possibility Principle states that a harmful act would cause a greater amount of benefit than harm to the harmed person is not enough to render the act morally permissible if there is an available alternative act that

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Harman, "Can We Harm and Benefit in Creating?," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 99.

would harmlessly confer comparable benefits on someone else. The question is what is meant by “comparable benefits.” If Harman means comparable gross benefit, then her account is no different from the comparative account because she allows that harm can be compensated for by enough benefit. For instance, in the rape case, the Comparative Account can say that she was harmed because she was made worse off than she would otherwise have been in some respects, yet was overall better off. Thus, the Comparative Account can account for the harm done in these kinds of cases. If Harman means comparable net benefit, then in cases in which the two acts are different, she would have to prefer the one that leaves you in a worse state. Consider the pin killer case again. There are two pain killers. One will relieve your pain by taking away all 10 units of pain and giving you 5 units of pain. The other will relieve your pain by just taking away 5 units of your pain. Let us stipulate that both painkillers work simultaneously and that you cannot feel the difference. In this case, both painkillers get the same result. In cases where you get the same end result, the Comparative Account agrees with the Non-comparative Account. However, if the case is such that the one painkiller relieves your pain by taking away all 10 units of pain and giving you 4.9 units of pain whereas the other relieves your pain by just taking away 5 units of pain, Harman has to say that you should prefer the pain killer that relieves your pain by just taking away 5 units of pain even though that would leave you in .1 more units of pain. This is because the painkiller that just takes away 5 units of pain only benefits you whereas the other painkiller harms and benefits you. However, the painkiller that just benefits you leaves you in a worse state; it leaves you in more pain than you would have been in had you chosen to take the other painkiller. So, on one horn of the dilemma, what Harman says is trivial because the Comparative Account gets the same results. On the other horn, the account is implausible because in cases in which the results of the two acts are different it has the absurd consequence

that you should prefer the choice that would leave you in a worse state. Thus, her use of the term comparable is too vague to be useful. One might think that her account is then merely meant to be a tiebreaker. Yet, this seems unlikely because Harman seems to care about harm. Therefore, the Non-comparative Account of harm should be rejected.

### III. The Person-affecting View

As Rebecca Bennett suggests in “The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence,” “...our common-sense concept of wrongdoing...usually involves some sense of harm to persons or at least to sentient creatures.”<sup>10</sup> Although there is a difference between an action being wrong for someone and an action making someone worse off, the two concepts are closely related. An act is usually thought of as wrong only if it harms someone and to harm someone is, roughly speaking, to make him or her worse off.<sup>11</sup> However, the view that an act is wrong only if it harms some particular individual restricts us to a person-affecting view about wrongness. If an act is wrong that does not make any individual worse off, this wrongness cannot be explained in terms of person-affecting consequences. Instead, the claim is that an act can be wrong because of some impersonal harm it causes. The term ‘impersonal harm’ may initially sound oxymoronic. However, it is the goal of this paper to show that not only is this a plausible view about wrongness but it is the correct view. On this view, there can be wrongness in the harm caused by diminishing the overall value in the world or by making the world a worse place than it

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<sup>10</sup> Rebecca Bennett, “The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence,” *Bioethics* 23 (2009): 267.

<sup>11</sup> Some views use words like suffering but I would say that in most cases if someone is made to suffer, they are made worse off in some way (even if they are not made worse off overall).

otherwise would have been.<sup>12</sup> Although some claim that impersonal harm is not a natural way to think about the claims of morality, there are several cases, such as Wilma's case, that show that we do find actions wrong which do not wrong any particular individual. In these cases, an appeal can be made to the wrong done when a person's actions cause the world to be in a worse state than it otherwise would have been in.

A common sense account of harm is that to harm someone is to make them worse off. A connection is often made between harm and compensation. Many believe that if you harm someone, you should compensate them or bring them back to the point they would have been if you had not harmed them. For example, if you break someone's windshield, you should pay to have it fixed in order to compensate that person. Similarly, a common sense account of wrong is that to wrong someone is to harm them in some way, or make them worse off. We often think that if someone has not harmed you, then you have no moral claim against that person. On this view, if Wilma's act did not make Pebbles worse off, then Pebbles was not harmed by Wilma's act and, therefore, Wilma's act was not wrong and Pebbles has no moral claim against her. Though you can be harmed without being wronged, on this view you cannot be wronged without being harmed. We are harmed or made worse off all of the time without being wronged. For instance, when a person stubs his toe, he can be said to have been harmed or made worse off, but not to have been wronged. On the other hand, people are not typically said to have been wronged unless they have been harmed in some way.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bennett, "The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence," 268.

<sup>13</sup> However, some people think you can be wronged without being harmed. Suppose you promise to do whatever I ask you. I then ask you to harm me and not to benefit me in any way. You then only benefit me (perhaps by paying off my mortgage, or curing my disease). Some might claim that you have wronged me, by breaking your promise. But, given the nature of the promise, you can't have harmed me.

People are generally drawn to the person-affecting view, or the view that if an act is bad it must be “bad for” someone. On this view, an act that affects no existing person for the worse, and maximizes (or at least predictably maximizes) well-being for every future person cannot be wrong. The idea that these acts cannot be wrong holds even if that same act makes the world worse in some impersonal sense. For instance, a certain act may not be worse for any particular individual, yet it might create less well-being in the aggregate when more might have been created.<sup>14</sup> On the person- affecting view, such an act cannot be wrong. The non-identity problem purports to show that these beliefs cannot both be correct. Either the person-affecting view is correct and our intuition that Wilma’s act is wrong is misguided, or the person-affecting view is false. I want to argue that our intuitions about cases like these are correct and that the person-affecting view is false.

It may be concluded from the argument that Pebbles would not have existed had Wilma taken the pill that because Wilma’s act did not harm Pebbles, it did not wrong her. If someone believes that an act cannot be wrong unless it is wrong for someone, he may also conclude that Wilma’s act was not wrong. This seems very counterintuitive. Though one might argue that the fact that this conclusion does not line up with our intuitions is not enough to show that Wilma’s act was wrong, it can be shown that Wilma’s act was wrong by appealing to more than just common sense intuitions. I will begin by setting forth and rejecting some other popular solutions to this problem. Then, I will show that Wilma’s action was wrong because it created less value in the world when more could have been created.

#### IV. Some Solutions

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<sup>14</sup> Melinda Roberts, "The Nonidentity Problem," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/nonidentity-problem/>>.

The claim that Wilma's act did not harm Pebbles is controversial. Some people reject P1 of the formalized argument above. One way that people argue that Wilma's act did in fact harm Pebbles is to reject the non-identity problem all together. In these cases, it is claimed that whichever child Wilma chose to have, the blind child or the sighted child, was Pebbles. However, due to facts about our actual reproductive systems, Wilma's child would be a different child depending on when she chose to conceive. Parfit refers to this assertion as the Time-Dependence Claim. He says, "If any particular person had not been conceived within a month of the time when he was in fact conceived, he would in fact never have existed."<sup>15</sup> If one believes in physical or mental continuity and that the mind is in some way related to the brain and you accept the claim that Pebbles' existence is not worse than her non-existence (because she has a life worth living), then you would accept the premise that Wilma's act does not make Pebbles worse off than she otherwise would have been.

Others claim that Pebbles was in fact harmed by Wilma's act by appealing to rights. One way to take this approach is to say that Pebbles had a right to a good start in life but this right was violated. However, because the circumstances under which she was born were the only circumstance she could have been born under, this right could not have been fulfilled. One might claim that because this right could not be fulfilled, it could not be violated. An objection to this would be that it is wrong to bring someone into existence with a right that cannot be fulfilled.<sup>16</sup> Yet, it is highly unlikely that a child in this situation would believe that their mother acted wrongly considering that the alternative would have been for them to have never existed. Had the mother waited to conceive a child she would have been able to provide a different child

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<sup>15</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 352.

<sup>16</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 364.

with a better start in life. According to Parfit, an appeal to a right that could not be fulfilled may provide some objection to our choice because we cannot just assume that a child in Pebbles' position would just waive this right because he or she does not regret their mother acting this way (because he or she does not think it would have been better for them if they had never existed).<sup>17</sup>

Yet, the idea that we all have rights that are nomologically impossible to satisfy seems absurd. Should we say that short people have a right to be taller or that men have a right to conceive children? If not, why would anyone think that everyone has a right not to be congenitally blind? Either this view of rights is absurd or it is a different view of rights, which is pretty clear to not have much, if anything, to do with wrongness. This view of rights would not be within the realm of morality. It would not say anything about what people have an obligation to do. You cannot have an obligation to make blind people sighted. And where would it end? Should we have a right to everything it would be nice to have. For instance should people have a right to not be bald? Rights are supposed to be connected with reasons for behavior.

## V. Solutions which Reject the Person-Affecting View

On the person-affecting view, an act is only right or wrong if it causes some particular individual to be better or worse off. However, Wilma's case shows that an act can be wrong even if it does not make some particular person worse off. In this case, the act was wrong due to some impersonal harm it caused. In "The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best

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<sup>17</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 365.

Chance of the Best Life,” Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane defend the Principle of Procreative Beneficence (PPB). According to this principle,

“If couples (or single reproducers) have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, then they have a significant moral reason to select the child, of the possible children they could have, whose life can be expected, in light of the relevant available information, to go best or at least not worse than any of the others.”<sup>18</sup>

On this view, if people have the opportunity to select which child they will bring into the world through genetic testing or in vitro fertilization, for example, they should choose the child that will have the best chance of a good life. Although this moral reason can be overridden, for instance, in cases in which choosing the child with the best chance of a good life might bring about considerable harm to others, it still carries significant weight. This view does not claim that Wilma’s act was wrong because it harmed Pebbles or violated her rights. Nor does it claim that Wilma’s act was wrong because it harmed someone else. Rather, it claims that how our actions will affect the world gives us some moral reason to choose one action over another. In the case of selecting future people who will inhabit this world, we have some moral reason to choose to have sighted children rather than blind children because sighted children’s lives can (in light of available relevant information) be expected to go best, or at least not worse than the lives of others. As Julian Savulescu claims, it is “bad that blind and deaf children are born when sighted and hearing children could have been born in their place.”<sup>19</sup> Bringing more individuals than necessary into the world that will face undesirable challenges is morally undesirable.<sup>20</sup>

The Principle of Procreative Beneficence instructs reproducers to select the child who can be expected to enjoy the most well-being in life. This principle can be applied to Wilma’s case.

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<sup>18</sup> Julian Savulescu and Guy Kahane, “The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life,” *Bioethics* 23 (2009): 274.

<sup>19</sup> Savulescu and Kahane, “The Moral Obligation to Create Children with the Best Chance of the Best Life,” *Bioethics*, 274.

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, “The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence,” 267.

In the example, Wilma went to see a doctor before she conceived. When this doctor informed her that she could easily prevent a blind child from being brought into existence at almost no expense to her, the Principle of Procreative Beneficence directed her to wait a month and give birth to a sighted child with a greater chance of the most possible well-being. Because Wilma had a choice between possible children she could have, selection was possible for her.

According to the Principle of Procreative Beneficence, Wilma should have chosen to take the pills, wait a month, and give birth to a sighted child who would be expected to have a better chance of enjoying the most well being in his life. On this view, Wilma's act was not morally preferred because, in performing it, she failed to select the child, of the possible children she could have had, whose life could be expected, in light of the relevant available information, to go best.

PPB takes into consideration the life of the child, but fails to consider how the child's life will affect other people. Again, PPB claims that when a person is planning to have a child and selection is possible that, she should choose to conceive the child whose life would be expected to not go worse than another. This principle says nothing about how that child's life might affect the lives of others. It is possible that the child whose life would be expected to go best for him might have considerably bad effects on the lives of others. Say for instance that a woman is planning to conceive and has the choice to conceive either Everyman or Superman. Everyman would have a fine life and Superman would have an amazing life. However, Superman would cause a great deal of misery for other people. PPB would tell you that you have the most moral reason to conceive Superman and for this reason, this principle is too restrictive. Further, this principle cannot solve the non-identity problem because it is a principle about what we have

moral reason to do. If we are to solve the non-identity problem we need a principle about wrongness; a principle which tells us why Wilma's act was wrong.

In the case of procreative selection, an appeal can also be made to how the act of selection can affect the overall expected value in the world. Whereas the Principle of Procreative Beneficence entails that an act can be bad if it brings about less individual well-being (well-being for a specific individual) when it could have brought more (to someone else), the Principle of General Procreative Beneficence (PGPB) entails that an act can be bad if it decreases the overall expected value in the world. In "Procreative Beneficence- Cui Bono?," Jakob Elster advances his view of what we have moral reason to do when making decisions about child selection. According to the Principle of General Procreative Beneficence, "If couples (or single reproducers) have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, then they have a significant moral reason to select the child, of the possible children they could have, whose life will maximize the expected overall value in the world."<sup>21</sup> One might wonder what makes one state of the world more valuable than another. But, as Elster claims, we do not have to answer this difficult question. Elster states that when making selective choices, "We simply need to know whether the foreseeable difference that it will make that this child rather than that child is born, is a difference for the better."<sup>22</sup> Thus, if there is a difference between choices that will impact the value in the world, we should make the choice that, for the foreseeable future, will contribute the most to the world's overall value.

In Wilma's case, the Principle of General Procreative Beneficence would suggest that she choose to take the pills, wait a month, and conceive a sighted child. On this view, Although Wilma's act did not harm Pebbles or any other particular individual, it was not morally preferred

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<sup>21</sup> Jakob Elster, "Procreative Beneficence- Cui Bono?," *Bioethics* 25 (2011): 483.

<sup>22</sup> Elster, "Procreative Beneficence- Cui Bono?," 483.

because it did not maximize the expected overall value of the world. Wilma had a choice between possible children she could have. She could choose to conceive a blind child immediately or a sighted child later. This view is not meant to maximize individual well-being (by this I mean well being for a specific individual, not total well being, all of which is located in different individuals) like the Principle of Procreative Beneficence, but is meant to maximize the overall value in the world. Because a sighted child would reasonably be expected to contribute more to the world's overall value than a blind child, Wilma should have chosen to conceive the sighted child. PGPB would recognize Wilma's act as bad because she knowingly made a choice to bring a child into existence whose life was not expected to maximize the overall value in the world.

PGPB is better than PPB because unlike PPB, PGPB instructs us to consider the lives of others as well as the life of the child to be created. In the case mentioned above, PGPB would tell us that when selection is possible and our choice is the Everyman or the Superman, we have significant moral reason to choose to have the Everyman. Though Superman's life would go better, his life would bring significant misery to the lives of others. In light of this available relevant information, it seems that the life of the Everyman would maximize the expected overall value in the world. This argument holds because the Everyman's life is still expected to go fine and the value of the life of the Superman would be outweighed by the significant misery his life would bring to others. The misery he would cause others would decrease the overall value in the world more than the Superman's amazing life would increase it.

However, there are two main problems with this view. First, as with PPB, PGPB only claims that we have "significant moral reason to select the child, of the possible children they could have, whose life will maximize the expected overall value in the world." It is not a

principle about wrongness but rather a principle about what we have the most reason to do. In order to solve the non-identity problem, we need a principle that tells us why Wilma's act was wrong. Say we were to make PGPB a principle about wrongness. On this account, if couples (or single reproducers) have decided to have a child, and selection is possible, then it would be morally wrong not to select the child, of the possible children they could have, whose life will maximize the expected overall value in the world. However, because PGPB is a conditional principle, it does not address the choice of having no child at all. The principle says that when selection is possible, one has a reason to choose to have the child whose life would maximize the overall expected values in the world. The principle states that *if a couple is deciding to have a child*, choosing to have a child whose life will be most worth living is likely to maximize the overall expected value in the world. However, it seems that our principle should allow the choice of having no child at all to be morally permissible and it should take this choice into consideration. In order to account for the *wrongness* in Wilma's act and to establish that it is morally permissible to choose to have no child at all when selection is possible, we need an even more generalized principle than PGPB.

I want to suggest the following principle: if when making choices which will affect who will later live, A decides to perform the act that will not maximize the overall expected value in the world, then that act is morally wrong.<sup>23</sup> Let us call this principle PGPB\*. PGPB\* is not merely a principle about reasons, but a principle about wrongness of actions. Wilma did not harm Pebbles by bringing her into existence. Even if we stipulate that Wilma's act did not harm anyone, including herself, I still want to say that her act was wrong. This argument hinges on the view that although Wilma's act did not wrong Pebbles or any other individual, it was still wrong

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<sup>23</sup> For those who believe that some rights can trump value, a clause could be added which says that there are some important rights that might block the promotion of value.

because by bringing an impaired child into existence, Wilma knowingly made the choice that was not expected to maximize the overall value in the world. Although a blind person has a life that is worth living, it is likely that a blind person's life is worse in certain respects than a sighted person. The world is in a better state when it is filled with people who will enjoy more well-being in life. If all who exist were to have lives that are worse, then the overall value in the world would be expected to be lower. Therefore, it is better if we bring those into existence who are expected to have more well-being in their lives. According to our definition of harm, A's act harms B if A's act makes B worse than B otherwise would have been. In this example, Wilma's act makes the world worse than it otherwise would have been by lowering the expected value in it. Wilma knowingly bringing a child into existence with a disability that was expected to have a negative impact on the world's overall value was wrong.

Theoretically speaking, if bringing a child into the world would positively contribute to the world's overall value, then, in accordance with PGPB\*, it would be better to have the child. If a child will have a life that is worth living, that child will positively contribute to the world's overall value given that such a child does not diminish the world's value by the effects of his or her life on the lives of others. If selection is possible when making choices that will affect who will later live, one should have the child that will best contribute to the world's overall value. Further, if it can reasonably be expected that you will have a child whose life is worth living, it seems as though one should have a child.

However, there are many things that should be taken into consideration when making such a choice. For instance, there is always the chance that if Wilma had given birth to a sighted child, this child could have been a criminal and possibly negatively impacted the overall expected value in the world more than the blind child would have. It is also possible that

the blind child could cause more happiness in the world and therefore be more likely to maximize the expected value in the world. We must consider the total effect. Any reason we would have to focus on a particular individual would be merely practical. However, we cannot know the total effect. Since we cannot know the total effect of our actions, all we can take into consideration when making a decision is which choice will reasonably be expected to have the best outcome (which choice will maximize the world's value). In this case, one would expect that a sighted child would be better off than a blind child and more likely to maximize overall expected value in the world. Therefore, the objection to Wilma's decision still holds.

Again, maybe it would be better if Wilma were to have no child at all. Maybe we should consider whether having any child would make things better or worse instead of only thinking about which child would have a better consequence. Whereas PPB and PGPB seems to only apply to choices between children, this principle allows for the choice to have no children at all in the real world. Having no child will not lessen the overall value that already exists yet having a child has the potential to increase or diminish value in the world. If the goal is to maximize overall value, having no child at all may be the safest choice. Bringing a child into existence has an affect on more than just the child's life and the lives of those closely connected to him, such as his immediate family. For example, overpopulation is increasingly posing a threat to the amount of resources available to us. It is possible that one child's life can require enough resources to take away a small amount from everyone else in the community and lower the value in the world. Having no child at all could not possibly make the world worse off than it was before (before the action took place). This principle implies that we are always obligated to make the world as good as we can make it. Since having a child whose life will be worth living could positively contribute to the world's overall value, it seems that this principle

does not allow for the choice to have no child at all in these cases. However, because of uncertainty about whether a child's life will lower or contribute to the world's overall value, we should allow for choice. In the real world we cannot know that x will be the better choice. We typically do not know which child or whether having any child at all will best contribute to the world's overall value. Thus, in the real world, we are permitted to have no child at all. Similarly, due to uncertainty in the real world, we are not obligated to have no child at all even if it might be even better for us to do so. Since we cannot know the total effect of our choices, we should allow for choice in decisions about reproduction. Yet, in cases where you can be pretty confident that one choice will be better than another you should make the better choice. When the choices are blind child or sighted child and that is all we know, we should choose to bring the sighted child into existence.

There are other worries concerning PGPB\*. For instance, PGPB\* also seems to imply that if selection is possible, then one is obligated to use this process to bring the child into existence whose life would best contribute to the world's overall value. However, the processes and procedures pertaining to selection can be dangerous. Because of this, one might think the principle is too demanding. There have been instances in which prenatal testing has caused birth defects or endangered the life of the fetus. Additionally, there is usually nothing wrong with the fetus being tested. In these cases, prenatal testing has no benefits. If there is no benefit and also the possibility of a negative effect (harm to the fetus), then one should not be morally obligated to undergo the procedure. Therefore, whether or not one is obligated to submit to such procedures depends on the test. It depends on what the risks might be and whether or not there are any benefits. If the risks are minimal and the benefits are significant, one should undergo prenatal testing.

## VI. The Risky Policy

Another example in which we can see how an act might be wrong without being wrong for anyone is Parfit's Risky Policy case.<sup>24</sup> By considering our obligations to future generations, the existence of impersonal harm becomes clearer. The example goes as follows:

As a community, we must choose between two energy policies. Both would be completely safe for at least three centuries, but one would have certain risks in the further future. This policy involves the burial of nuclear waste in areas where, in the next few centuries, there is no risk of an earthquake. But since this waste will remain radioactive for thousands of years, there will be risks in the distant future. If we choose this Risky Policy, the standard of living will be somewhat higher over the next century. We do choose this policy. As a result, there is a catastrophe many centuries later. Because of geological changes to the Earth's surface, an earthquake releases radiation, which kills thousands of people. Though they are killed by this catastrophe, these people will have lives that are worth living. We can assume that this radiation affects only people who are born after its release, and that it gives them an incurable disease that will kill them about the age of 40. This disease has no effects before it kills.<sup>25</sup>

In this case, as in the Wilma case, the people who are affected by the choice would never have existed had another choice been made. The non-identity problem is still in effect here. The policy chosen will affect who will later live. After a few centuries, no person living would have come into existence had the other policy been chosen. But because their lives are worth living, and they do not suffer before they die, we have not harmed them by bringing them into existence.

Choosing the risky policy did not harm anyone because the people whose existence depended on this decision had lives worth living. These people, who will have worthwhile but shortened lives, were born into the only circumstances that they could have been born into. However, since this choice will lead to thousands of deaths, it seems like the act is still morally wrong. Any claim someone can make about this act's wrongness cannot be grounded in the fact

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<sup>24</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 359.

<sup>25</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 361-362.

that these people's lives were made worse off. These people's lives were not made worse off, because the other option would have been for them to never exist and we would not say it would be better for them if they had never existed. As Parfit states, "Some believe that what is bad must be bad for someone."<sup>26</sup> If we hold this view, even though it will cause a great lowering of the quality of life in the future, there is no objection to our choice to adopt the policy that will lead to thousands of untimely deaths. Because the great lowering of the quality of life should provide some moral reason not to choose the Risky Policy, this view should be rejected.<sup>27</sup> The view Parfit refers to is the person-affecting view. As I have shown, the wrongness in this case cannot be person-affecting. The harm done was impersonal because no individual's welfare was affected (excluding those who enjoyed a higher standard of living over the first century after the decision was made). Again, I want to say that the reason this act was wrong is that it lowered, rather than maximized, the world's overall expected value. The world is certainly in a worse state when thousands of people or more die due to the decisions of a community.

In fact, Parfit has similar reactions to this case and others like it. He maintains that it does not make a moral difference that the risky policy will be worse for no one. Parfit refers to this as the No-Difference View.<sup>28</sup> We can surely remember a time when we thought about how our actions might affect future generations. For example, when we recycle, try to conserve resources, or are concerned with new methods of fueling vehicles, we often imagine how those decisions might impact those who will live after us. When we become aware of the non-identity problem and that in light of this problem our actions may not actually affect particular future people, I do not think this concern loses its force. Likewise, Parfit affirms that he did not

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<sup>26</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 363.

<sup>27</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 363.

<sup>28</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 367.

become less concerned about the effects of our decisions on future generations after becoming aware of the non-identity problem.<sup>29</sup> He argues that it would be bad if there were a great lowering of the quality of life in the future and that it would not be worse if it were to in fact affect particular individuals as it would in same people choices.<sup>30</sup> Same people choices are those in which the same people will later live regardless of which choice we make. Same people choices affect neither the identities of future people nor the number of people who will exist.<sup>31</sup> Parfit's discussion of the Risky Policy case concerns different people choices but same number choices. Same number choices are choices in which the same number of people will live regardless of our choice. Same number choices do affect the identities of future people, but not their number.

According to Parfit, accepting the No-Difference View has important theoretical implications. He makes the assumption that causing someone to exist does not thereby benefit this person.<sup>32</sup> If we accept the No-Difference View, and believe that we do not benefit someone by bringing him into existence, what Parfit calls Q and V can be drawn. Parfit puts Q as follows: "If in either of two possible outcomes the same number of people would ever live, it will be worse if those who live are worse off, or have a lower quality of life, than those who would have lived."<sup>33</sup> V is Parfit's version of the person-affecting view. V is stated as, "It will be worse if people are affected for the worse."<sup>34</sup> If we accept the no difference view, then, in same number choices, we should appeal to Q rather than V. Parfit stipulates that Q applies only in same number choices because in same people choices Q and V coincide. In the Risky Policy case, if

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<sup>29</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 367.

<sup>30</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 369.

<sup>31</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 356.

<sup>32</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 358.

<sup>33</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 369.

<sup>34</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 369.

we choose the risky policy, the quality of life will be lower in the future. However, our choice will not be bad for any particular individual, because their existence depended on this choice. Whereas Q specifies that our act has had a bad effect, V does not. Further, Parfit claims that if we believe the No-Difference View, this bad effect would not be worse even if it were worse for particular people. If the Risky Policy were to be a same people choice it would affect particular individuals. In this case, the fact that this decision would affect particular people would not make it a worse decision than it would be if it affected no one in particular. Therefore, Parfit concludes, the person-affecting view, or V, gives us the wrong answer in cases like the Risky Policy case. On the other hand, Q explains the effects that we believe to be bad about these kinds of examples.<sup>35</sup>

There are two problems with Q. First, it merely explains why we think the choice of the risky policy is bad, not our intuition that is wrong. If we are to solve the non-identity problem, we need a principle that explains the wrongness in these kinds of examples. Again, we should appeal to PGPB\*. According to this principle, choosing the risky policy was wrong because it lowered rather than maximized the overall expected value in the world. Choosing a policy, which would lead to the untimely deaths of thousands of people or more, would not be expected to maximize the overall expected value in the world. Secondly, Q only applies to same number choices. Q specifies that the act of choosing the risky policy would have a bad effect, but only in choices in which the same number of people will later live. Since this is incredibly unlikely, we need a principle that applies to different number cases. It seems more likely that there would be fewer people because conditions would have gotten worse. PGPB\* addresses different number choices. PGPB\* pertains to the total value of the lives of whoever comes into existence.

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<sup>35</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 369-370.

## VII. Objections

In “The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence,” Bennett acknowledges that if we have moral reasons not to choose the risky policy, these reasons must have to do with avoiding creating a worse world rather than being out of the concern for the welfare of individuals. As Bennett claims, “If harm is done it is done not to the people who will live in the future, but in the sense of creating a world that has less value than it might have done [sic].”<sup>36</sup> However, she maintains that the possibility of the notion of impersonal harm is only plausible in that it can explain the intuitive response to cases like Parfit’s Risky Policy case. According to Bennett, an account of harm that holds that it is possible to do harm without harming any particular individual is too abstract and difficult to grasp. On her view, the Principle of Procreative Beneficence fails solely because it is theoretically founded on this notion of impersonal harm. She claims that this argument is only advanced because one might think it is the only way that we can explain our intuitions about cases like Wilma’s and the Risky Policy example.<sup>37</sup>

Instead of appealing to impersonal harm, Bennett attempts to explain our intuitions about the Risky Policy example and others like it by appealing to a notion of preference. According to Bennett, our intuitions about these cases can be explained by preference rather than morality.<sup>38</sup> She argues that if no particular individual is harmed by the choice of the Risky Policy, then that decision was no longer within the realms of morality. Therefore, she claims that this was no

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<sup>36</sup> Bennett, “The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence,” 268.

<sup>37</sup> Bennett, “The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence,” 268-269.

<sup>38</sup> Bennett, “The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence,” 269.

longer a moral choice, but merely a preference for one policy over the other. On this view, the reasons for choosing one policy over the other would not be moral reasons. She holds that these are merely preferences for which sort of world one might think he would prefer to live in. In Wilma's case, the choice would just be about what sorts of children one believes she would prefer to have. Bennett states, "So long as we expect the lives to be created to be worthwhile (i.e. not dominated by pain and suffering) then it is a matter of moral indifference which lives we choose to bring to birth."<sup>39</sup> Therefore, since those who will later live as a result of Wilma's choice or choosing the Risky Policy will have lives worth living, it was a morally neutral decision. We might have a strong preference for choosing a sighted embryo over a blind embryo or a safe policy over a risky policy, but we can say little more than that we find contrary preferences disagreeable. Bennett maintains that because there can be no moral obligation to choose one worthwhile life over another, and the people who would come into existence due to these contrary preferences will have lives worth living, we have no moral obligation to make one choice over the other.<sup>40</sup>

However, it is implausible to say that the choice of the risky policy was not a moral choice. It seems that there is much more at stake in these cases. For one, in the Risky Policy case, this choice was at least a moral choice in that one policy would bring about a higher quality of life for the first century whereas the other would not. This would be a moral choice in the sense that, in the first century, it will benefit people who already existed when the choice was made. Though Bennett claims that they had no moral reasons to choose one policy over another, how a policy will affect the well-being of a community certainly gives one moral reasons to choose one policy over the other, even if these are not overriding reasons. I maintain that the

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<sup>39</sup> Bennett, "The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence," 269.

<sup>40</sup> Bennett, "The Fallacy of the Principle of Procreative Beneficence," 269.

Risky Policy was not the right choice, but the fact that it would positively affect the welfare of those who will live in the first century after the decision is made is a reason to choose the risky policy. And that reason is a moral reason because the welfare of people, although not particular people, is at stake and welfare is certainly within the realm of morality. In fact, because this choice is a moral choice, it seems that Bennett would have to favor the Risky Policy. Though her view is indifferent when it comes to choices which will affect the identities of future people (as long as they have lives worth living), on this view, the fact that the Risky Policy will benefit those who already exist when the decision is made gives us some *moral* reason to choose the Risky Policy rather than the safer policy. This is even more counterintuitive than the claim that morality is indifferent between the two policies.

Also, it seems too weak to claim that which policy should be chosen is merely a matter of preference, even if we are considering only those whose existence will depend on which policy is chosen (not those who will live in the first century after the decision is made). Although the decision does not affect the welfare of particular individuals, it does have an effect on the welfare of those who will later live, no matter who they are. Regardless of the fact that those who will live will have lives worth living, the choice of the Risky Policy is the wrong choice. The people who would have lived had the safer policy been chosen would have been expected to have better lives overall, which were not cut short by disease and death. We have a moral obligation to make the choice that would be expected to maximize overall value in the world. Even though we did not harm those who will be brought into existence after the risky policy is chosen, it would not have been worse if we had chosen to bring into existence those who would later have lived had we chosen the safer policy. If we had chosen the safer policy, the outcome would have been better. It would not have been better because it would have been better for

particular individuals but because it would have created more value in the world. It is not merely an intuition that some wrong was done by choosing the Risky Policy. This choice was wrong and its wrongness can be explained by the affect this choice had on the world's value.

A similar argument follows in Wilma's case. It is too weak to claim that Wilma's choice to have a blind child was a morally neutral decision and that which child she chose to conceive was merely a matter of preference. Although it was not worse for anyone in particular for Wilma to choose to have the blind child, it also would not have been worse for anyone if Wilma had chosen to conceive the sighted child instead. If two choices are equal in every respect except one, and one is better than the other in that respect, we have reason to choose the one that is better in that respect. Therefore, if the two embryos are equal in every respect except that one will be born as a blind child and the other will be born as a sighted child, and it is expected to be better to be sighted than to be blind, we have a reason to choose to conceive the sighted child. This reason is a moral reason because the decision could be expected to have an impact on the world's overall value. Again, Wilma's decision to have the blind child rather than the sighted child would not reasonably be expected to maximize the world's overall value.

In order to illustrate this point, it is worth considering another example. Say that giving Wilma the pill that will prevent her child's blindness will prevent the doctor from giving a pain-killer to someone who is suffering from a moderate temporary condition. Because of this, Wilma decides not to take the pills and, nine months later, she gives birth to the blind child. The fact that giving this person a pain killer will benefit this person gives Wilma some moral reason to choose to have the blind child just as the fact that the Risky Policy will bring benefits to those who will live in the first three centuries after the decision is made gives us some moral reason to choose the Risky Policy. However, because the suffering of a person with a moderate temporary

condition does not outweigh the effect that the blind child's life will have on the overall expected value in the world, her decision to have the blind child would still be wrong.

The Risky Policy case may be a more compelling example than Wilma's case because whereas Wilma's choice will potentially only affect one life, the life of whichever child she chooses to bring into existence, the choice of the Risky Policy has the potential to affect thousands, millions, or even billions of lives. I say that Wilma's case will have an effect on one life, because, although it will not harm the blind child if he is to be conceived, it will affect Wilma's child in that it will affect who Wilma's child will be. In this case, "Wilma's child" has no particular identity. Her child is simply the child that Wilma would have. Wilma can choose to bring into existence either a blind child or a sighted child and her decision will have an effect on that child in that he will be born. Similarly, though the choice of the Risky Policy will not harm any particular individuals, because they have lives worth living and would not have existed otherwise, this choice will have an effect on future people because it will affect who will later live. If the safer policy had been chosen, presumably the same number of people would have lived, but they would have been different people.<sup>41</sup> The Risky Policy case is an even more persuasive example than Wilma's case, because we commonly think it is worse if thousands of people live worse lives than if just one person lives a worse life (despite who those people might be). Also, it is likely that thousands or more lives will have more of an impact on the world's overall value than one life.

Although some people believe that a choice cannot have a bad effect unless this choice has a bad effect on someone, this view is implausible. The Risky Policy example makes it clear that we must reject the person-affecting view. In this case, we knowingly made a choice that

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<sup>41</sup> Parfit stipulated that the same number of people would have lived regardless of which choice was made because if this choice involved different numbers of people, the case becomes much more difficult to analyze and this fact would have different implications on how we should analyze and criticize these kinds of decisions.

will lead to a catastrophe that kills thousands of people. As Parfit contends, “This effect is clearly bad, even though our choice will be worse for no one.”<sup>42</sup> The harm done here is impersonal harm, but I do not think that this should make the case any less compelling. The objection to our choice is no less strong when we see that our choice will harm no one. It does not make a moral difference that our acts do not harm any particular people.

In Wilma’s example, as in the Risky Policy example, the acts done are wrong, because they are not expected to maximize the world’s overall value. Although these acts do not lower the welfare of any particular individuals, they lower the level of well-being of those who inhabit the world, whoever they may be. The lowering of well-being of people would be expected to diminish the overall expected value in the world. It is worse for the world’s value when the lives of those who exist are worse than the lives of those who would have lived if another choice had been made. In Wilma’s case, her choice could have been expected to negatively impact the amount of well-being in the world, because a blind child would reasonably be expected to have less well-being than a sighted child, and knowing this, she chose to conceive the blind child. In the Risky Policy example, the choice made brought about a lower amount of well-being in the world because their lives were cut short by disease whereas those who would have lived had the safer policy been chosen would not have been affected in this way. Even if the lives of those brought into existence by acts like these are worth living, these acts still have a bad effect on the world when they cause a worse outcome than another choice would have produced. Not only do these acts have a bad effect, they are wrong. Therefore, the person affecting view is false.

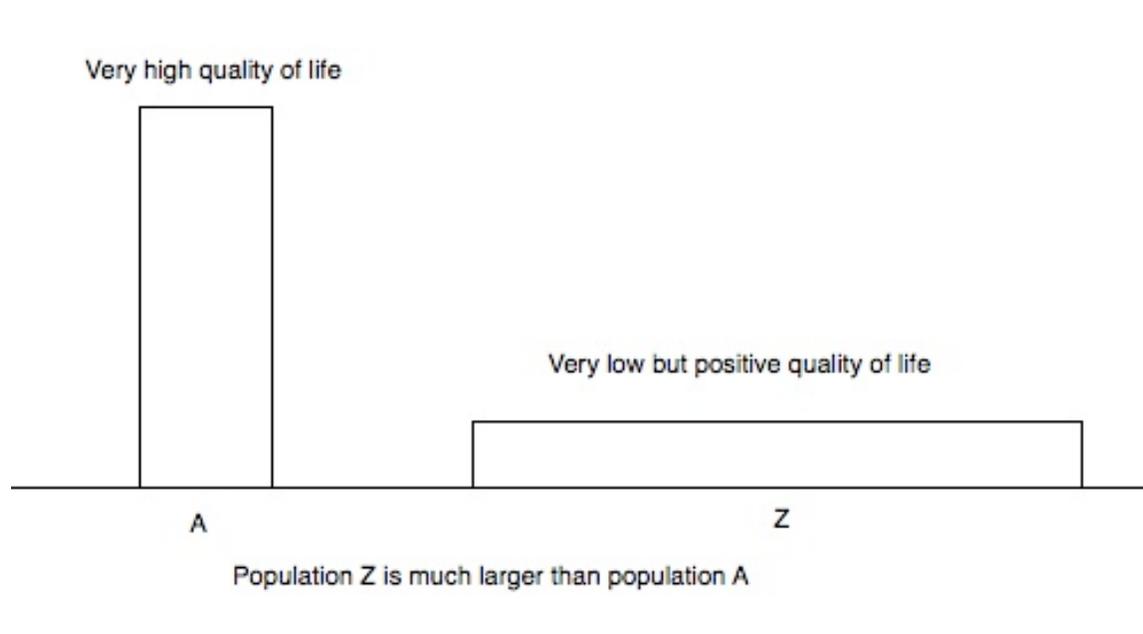
## VIII. Repugnant Conclusion

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<sup>42</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 378.

One restriction on solutions to the non-identity problem is modesty. We want a principle that is strong, but not too strong. We want to reject at least one premise of the argument but not in a way that is more implausible or absurd than the argument we are attempting to reject. One of the implications of my view is known as the Repugnant Conclusion. Though some might claim that this implication is more absurd than just accepting the non-identity problem, I do not think it is.

Parfit characterizes the Repugnant Conclusion as follows; “For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better even though its members have lives that are barely worth living.”<sup>43</sup> Consider the following figure:<sup>44</sup>



<sup>43</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 388.

<sup>44</sup> Gustaf Arrhenius, Jesper Ryberg, and Torbjörn Tännsjö, "The Repugnant Conclusion," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/repugnant-conclusion/>>.

If we accept the No-Difference View we are lead to Parfit's *Impersonal Total Principle* which states, "If other things are equal, the best outcome is the one in which there would be the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living."<sup>45</sup> This view implies that any loss in the quality of lives in a population can be compensated for by a sufficient gain in the quantity of a population. If this is true, we should prefer world Z in the figure above, even though the people living in this world have lives that are barely worth living. In world Z, we can expect that the world will have a higher overall value because there will be so many lives with a positive value.

Though most people have the intuition that world Z is morally undesirable, in "In Defense of Repugnance," Michael Huemer shows that this intuition is mistaken and that the Repugnant Conclusion is true. He claims that the simplest explanation for the truth of the Repugnant Conclusion is that more worthwhile lives are better and thus increasing the number of worthwhile lives makes the world better. The argument runs as follows:

- (1) It is better for there to be more lives with positive welfare
- (2) The marginal value of such lives does not diminish so as to create an upper bound to the value of such lives
- (3) If (1) and (2), then the Repugnant Conclusion is true
- (4) So the Repugnant Conclusion is true (from (1), (2), (3))<sup>46</sup>

The first two premises are supported by the belief that it is better for the human species to survive longer. What value a life contributes to the world's total value does not depend on when that life occurs. Therefore, it should not make a difference whether we are adding lives with a positive welfare in the future or in space (in our current population).<sup>47</sup> Also, a life barely worth living is not as bad as one might think. In fact, many people are leading lives that are barely worth in our current population. We must remember that these lives have a positive welfare

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<sup>45</sup> Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 387.

<sup>46</sup> Michael Huemer, "In Defense of Repugnance," *Mind* 117 (2008): 923.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Huemer, "In Defense of Repugnance," 925.

level. If one does not exist, one has no welfare level at all. Other things being equal, if you exist with a positive level of welfare, then the world is better if you exist than it would be without you because there is more value in the world.<sup>48</sup> If we accept the formalized argument above and that a life barely worth living is not as bad as it may initially seem, we can see that the fact that PGPB\* entails the Repugnant Conclusion is not an strong enough reason to reject this principle.

## IX. Duties to Future Generations

I now want to discuss how this argument might influence how we think about our duties to future generations. It is common to imagine how our actions will affect those who will live after us. Many aspects of our daily lives include these kinds of decisions. For example, many people recycle plastic, a material that does not biodegrade and will continue to exist for thousands of years, in hopes of reducing the amount of plastic produced. We also try to conserve natural resources such as water and fossil fuels. There has been a mass movement toward “green” living, a lifestyle in which people are more conscious about how their actions impact their environment and non-human animals. In most cases, these decisions will not have a significant impact in their lifetime, but rather on the world in which future generations will live.

After learning about the non-identity problem, many people’s intuitions about these cases do not change. For many, although they realize these acts do not harm anyone, they still seem wrong. In Wilma’s case and in the Risky Policy case, the choices made do not harm any particular individuals. If we believe that the person-affecting account of harm is true, we cannot explain the wrongness of these acts. It appears that as long as the people who later live have

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Huemer, “In Defense of Repugnance,” 924.

lives that are worth living, we do not have any obligations to future generations. This view seems implausible to me. If the decisions of our community will cause certain people to later come into existence, and those people will have worthwhile lives, it seems that we can select whichever destructive policies will be likely to ensure the highest levels of welfare in our lives and the lives of our children.

On this view, we should use as much of our natural resources as we wish. For example, many people try to ride their bikes, carpool, take buses, and even walk in order to minimize their use of fossil fuels and help reduce the amount of destruction done to our atmosphere. However, in many cases, it would be much more convenient, to not use the alternative methods of transportation. It might in some cases even increase their level of well-being if they each used their own vehicle. Maybe parents who take the bus to work would be able to spend more time with their children, if they drove themselves, and this could increase their overall welfare. Yet, it seems wrong to implement these destructive policies in order to increase the level of well-being in our own lives. If we choose more conservative policies not only will there likely be many lives that are worthwhile in the future, but those lives will also likely be more worthwhile in themselves. We have a duty to make the choice that will be expected to maximize the overall value in the world and not merely maximize the well-being in the lives of particular individuals.

If, along with Bennett, we agree that any choice we make about whom to bring into existence merely depends on what our preferences are as long as those lives will be worth living, then we have no reason to consider the welfare of future generations. If these kinds of decisions should only be made in accordance with what our preferences are, then everyone is free to do what they please when making decisions about conception or whether or not to conserve the world's resources. In this case, many people might choose to deplete our resources because it

would allow for a better quality of life in their lifetime. This seems wrong. Therefore, Bennett's view about preference does not give us the right results when considering future generations. Instead, we should make the choices that would allow for the most well-being in our lifetimes and in the future. We should not make choices that would reduce the welfare of those who will later live.

## X. Conclusion

I have argued that the person-affecting view should be rejected. Wilma's case, the Risky Policy example, and others like it make it clear that an act can be wrong, even if it does not harm any particular individual. In these cases, the only way to explain the wrongness is by appealing to a notion of impersonal harm. These acts are wrong because they do not maximize the overall expected value in the world. These arguments also imply that we have duties to future generations. We have moral reasons to act in ways that will maximize the world's overall value in the future. The wrongness in examples like Wilma's and the Risky Policy cannot be explained in terms of person-affecting consequences. However, this does not show that we should conclude that these decisions are outside the realm of morality. There is a part of morality that is concerned with well-being and value, which can only be explained by appealing to impersonal harm. We should accept this view rather than concluding that Wilma's choice and the choice of the Risky Policy are not wrong and that we have no moral obligations to future generations.

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