



Phil 173: Non-identity and Impossible Obligations

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When is reproduction harmful?

Denying a premise:

- ☐ **'no harm, no foul' principle (wrongdoing only in cases of harm)**
- ☐ Counterfactual account of harm (**Tue**)
- ☐ Time-dependency claim (gamete-dependency claim)
- ☐ Permissibility of creating offspring in the cases described

Non-identity problem and rights

- Some objections to rights as a solution :
 - Lack of complaint
 - Still better-off
 - Is this good enough?
 - Unfairness
 - Too much reproduction becomes impermissible
 - Bite the bullet

Non-identity problem and rights

- Some other objections

- All reproduction becomes impermissible (antinatalism)

- Everyone experiences rights violations!

- The problem is just shifted...

- How do we determine what the threshold for rights violations are?

When is reproduction harmful?

- Last time we looked at rights violations
 - We can violate rights without harming
 - Examples?
 - This provides the wrongdoing!
 - Note that the child is wronged!
 - What were some of the problem with the view?
 - I suggested two
 - Any others?

Impossible obligations

- Noggle offers a different argument
- First, we think that parents have certain obligation to their children:
 - Think of some examples?
 - Health
 - Education
 - Warm relationships etc.
 - Sometimes we cannot fulfill our obligations through no fault of our own
 - We might think we have to make up for these failures, but we didn't act wrongly

Impossible obligations

- But what if we take on an obligation we know we cannot fulfill?

Slippery Pete: Due to limited classroom space, the faculty in Pete's department take turns teaching a class during the dreaded 8:00 a.m. slot. Next semester, it is Pete's turn. The only practical way for Pete to get to campus by 8:00 a.m. is by driving. Knowing all this, Pete gives away his car and then announces that he cannot be obligated to teach the 8:00 a.m. class he has been assigned, since it is now impossible for him to get to campus that early.

Impossible obligations

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Impossible obligations

- Weaselly Wally is a competent philosophy professor, but he barely passed high school calculus. The math department needs someone to teach an advanced calculus class scheduled at a desirable time. Wally volunteers to teach the class, and thus avoids teaching the dreaded 8:00 a.m. Business Ethics course. Predictably, he teaches calculus poorly. When confronted by his Dean, Wally pleads that he is incapable of teaching calculus effectively, and should not be faulted for failing to do what he cannot do.

Impossible obligations

The Principle of Deliberate Impossibility PDI

PDI: It is morally wrong for S to deliberately Φ at t_1 if S expects her Φ -ing to make it impossible for S to Ψ at t_2 , where S 's Ψ -ing at t_2 would have been obligatory had S 's Φ -ing not made it impossible for S to Ψ , and where the impossibility of S 's Ψ -ing is the direct cause of its being non-obligatory.⁶



Impossible obligations

Note that the PDI does not require that wrongdoing makes someone worse off than they otherwise would be!

Can anyone try think up an example?

Here's mine – the dog and the cake

Impossible obligations

How does this help solve the non-identity problem?

- Reproducers have an obligation to prevent their child from becoming blind
- It is wrong for the reproducers to do something at T1 that prevents them from fulfilling this obligations at T2
- Reproducers forgoing the medication makes it impossible to prevent blindness at T2
- Had they not forgone the medication, preventing blindness would have been obligatory
- Therefore the reproducers act wrongly

Noggle thinks this holds even if the child has a life with good prospects, and is not harmed by the decision (made worse off)!



Impossible obligations

Some obligations that Noggle considers:

- ☐ It makes reproduction impermissible for some people in a way that is problematic
- ☐ It requires us to do too much

Impossible obligations

Some other objections:

- The reproductive case is importantly disanalogous from the other cases because it is *never* possible for the child to exist any other way
- It merely shifts the ‘floor’ for permissible reproduction, but the non-identity problem still arises (perhaps)
- It makes all reproduction impossible