

PERSONS,
POPULATIONS,
AND VALUE

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Abstract

This thesis consists of six independent papers on personal identity, population ethics, and value theory. The central theme of this thesis is the unimportance of personal identity. I begin in Chapter 1 by developing new Parfitian arguments for the unimportance of personal identity in morality, paying special attention to their implications in population ethics. In Chapter 2 I analyse Mark Johnston's similar metaphysics-driven challenge to person-based morality, but argue that it is less successful than my own. In Chapter 3 I lay out choices facing egalitarians in population ethics, arguing against some recently prominent forms of egalitarianism. In Chapter 4 I provide new decision-theoretic arguments against deontic constraints on harming, suggesting that it is consequentialism rather than deontology that can better respect persons. In Chapter 5 I introduce transfinite extensions of the familiar value-theoretic principles of transitivity and acyclicity. I use them to try to resolve some key issues in population ethics, concerning the value of creating new people and the procreative asymmetry. In Chapter 6 I aim to support these transfinite principles by analysing their role in the theory of rational choice.

Word count: 60591

Introduction

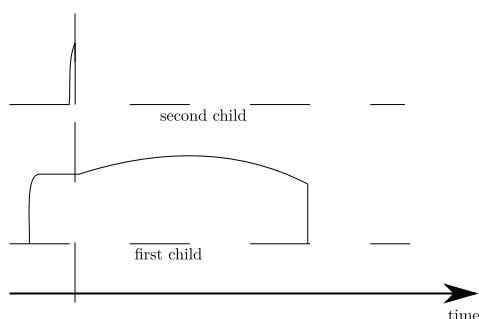
This thesis consists of six independent papers. Each of them is self-standing and can be read independently of the others.

Instead of duplicating the expository material contained in each of the six papers, this integrative introduction will provide a thematic overview of the thesis as a whole.

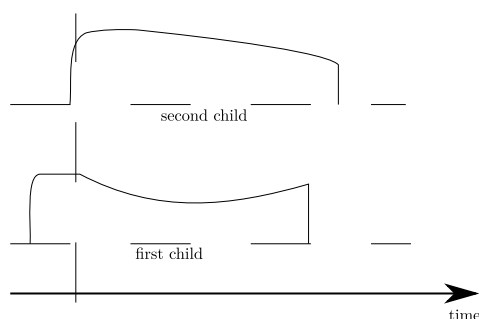
The central theme of this thesis is the unimportance of personal identity. Does it matter, for example, whether it is you or someone else who benefits from your current sacrifice? I take it that most people want to answer “Yes”. I will argue that the right answer is often “No”. I focus on examples from population ethics and deontological morality.

The issue of personal identity in population ethics can be illustrated nicely by an example of Broome’s. He asks: “[w]hat resources should be used for saving young, perhaps premature, babies?” and imagines a situation where “a particular baby can be saved at the cost of reducing her sibling’s standard of life” (2004: 9).

Following Broome, we can use the following diagram to illustrate this choice, where each possible person is allocated one horizontal axis and the height of the graph represents how well their life is going at any given time.

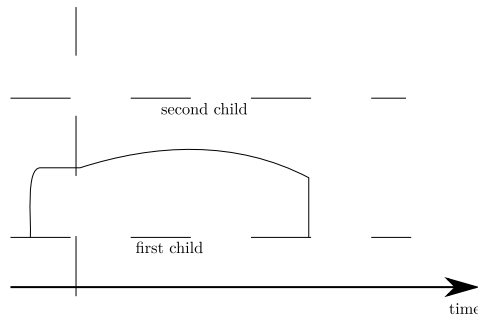


Help the first child

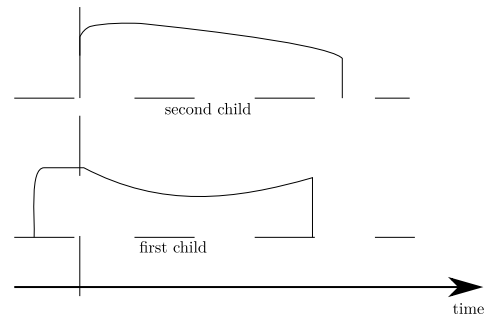


Save the second child

Now compare this case with one where the second child will only come to exist a little later.



Help the first child



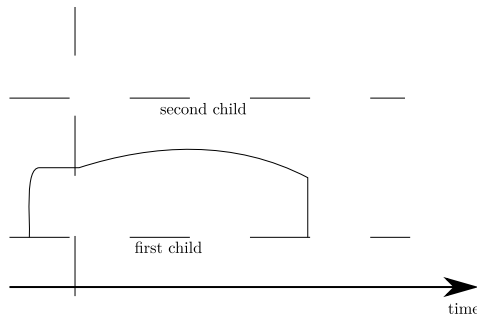
Create a second child

As Broome says, the two cases differ

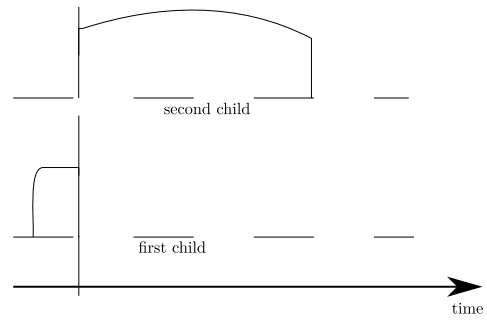
“only in the second child’s very short existence before the present. Many people would be inclined to think this small blip in the diagram makes all the difference to the problem. The value of prolonging the life of an existing person seems quite different from the value of creating a new person” (2004: 9-10).

If we share this intuition, we think that personal identity matters. We think it matters whether the second child has just come into existence or is about to.

For a perhaps starker example, imagine that, for the second child to exist, the first child’s life not only has to be worse but has to end prematurely, as in the diagram below.



Save the first child



Create a second child

Here the only difference between the two courses of action is whether a given pattern of wellbeing is spread across two lives or just one. Many people think that this difference matters. This is another way in which personal identity might be important. Many theories of population ethics agree that personal identity matters. For example, average utilitarianism, according to which the value of an outcome is the average wellbeing of people alive in it, implies that it is better to prolong lives rather than create new ones, at least if all lives at issue would be good.¹ This is also an implication of critical-level utilitarianism, according to which the value of an outcome is the total of everyone's welfare minus the positive critical-level parameter α .² Similarly, even when the number of people affected stays constant, the core egalitarian principle of Pigou-Dalton implies that it is better to spread out good years so as to equalize the quality of people's lives on the whole.³ So, egalitarians also care about personal identity. There are many other examples, too.⁴

This sensitivity to personal identity has often been criticized. For example, Hudson's (1987) objection to average utilitarianism is that

¹ Compare Blackorby et al. (2005: 151-2).

² Critical-level utilitarianism is defended by Broome (2004) and Blackorby et al. (2005).

³ A recent extensive discussion of the Pigou-Dalton principle is in Adler (2012: 339-356).

⁴ They are detailed in the first chapter of my BPhil thesis "Metaphysics of Persons and Population Ethics".

“there seems to be a graduated progression from clear-cut persons to clear-cut non-persons, rather than any sharp distinction. (...) It will make a moral difference whether a given history is considered to be the history of a single person or of two different but closely related persons. But distinctions of this sort are also matters of degree, so any such theory is unsatisfactory” (127).⁵

What are we to make of suggestions like these? Can we turn them into explicit arguments against theories of population ethics which attach importance to personal identity?

I take up this issue in the first two chapters of this thesis.

In Chapter 1: **“Intrinsic Concerns without Extended Selves”** I examine Derek Parfit’s pioneering arguments for the moral unimportance of personal identity.⁶ I try to find their best and most defensible versions.

First, I argue that almost any account of personal identity makes it implausibly extrinsic, both in cases of fission and superlongevity. This includes David Lewis’s and Barry Dainton’s accounts which are typically advertised as avoiding any extrinsicness in personal identity.⁷ We no longer have to find out what happens in these sci-fi cases: all accounts of what happens lead to implausible extrinsicness. Since nothing of moral importance can be extrinsic in the way I argue personal identity is, it follows that personal identity doesn’t matter. I reach a similar conclusion about cases of superlongevity which involve extremely long-lived people who are otherwise psychologically like us.

⁵ Similar comments can be found in Chapter 15 of Parfit’s *Reasons and Persons*.

⁶ See Parfit (1971, 1987, 2007).

⁷ See Lewis (1983), Dainton (1992).

Second, I argue that cases of fission show that personal identity is subject to a special sort of indeterminacy, distinct from mere vagueness, but related to the sort of indeterminacy Hartry Field claimed to find in Newtonian physics.⁸ I argue that personal identity is therefore not substantive and cannot be morally relevant.

While I think these Parfitian arguments likely work, it is important to take note of their limitations. They show, at best, that factors of moral importance, the presence of extra goodness or badness, say, cannot depend on how person-stages are packaged into people's lives. But this doesn't mean they cannot depend on other relations among people's person-stages. For example, we might still think that average welfare or equality of person-stages matters, in addition to the total of person-stage welfare in the world.

Chapter 2: "**Johnston *versus* Johnston**" discusses a different type of argument against the importance of personal identity, due to Mark Johnston. He argues that the intrinsicness of moral status combined with a four-dimensionalist ontology of David Lewis undermines any recognizably commonsense, person-based moral outlook.⁹ Johnston suggests that the problem generalizes beyond four-dimensionalism to any broadly naturalistic theory of our place in the world.

While I am sympathetic to Johnston's challenge, I think it runs into some problems. For one thing, there are independent reasons to reject or revise the account of intrinsicness Johnston relies on. For another, his discussion assumes an overly simplistic connection between value and its metaphysical basis. To make a successful argument from metaphysics to ethics, we must not import unwarranted metaphysics into the ethics. I think my arguments in Chapter 1 have the virtue of being immune to that kind of criticism.

⁸ See Field (1973).

⁹ See Johnston (2016, 2017).

The next two chapters move on to discuss specific examples of sensitivity to personal identity in moral philosophy.

I begin with egalitarianism in Chapter 3: **“Egalitarianism and Population Size”**. Egalitarianism is well understood when it comes to situations where the number of people is fixed, but not when it comes to situations where creating new people is a possibility.

I argue that egalitarians face some uncomfortable choices in the latter type of situation. I pinpoint a form of egalitarianism that they have to accept if they want to stay true to the idea that relations between people matter but also to avoid some familiar objections, including the levelling-down objection, which alleges that egalitarianism absurdly implies there would be something good about blinding the sighted as a means of reducing inequality.¹⁰

I then go on to argue that this form of egalitarianism delivers implausible and unmotivated verdicts in cases where creating new people is a possibility. Some of my examples are choices between prolonging a life and creating a new one. I conclude that egalitarians remain vulnerable to familiar objections to their view, chiefly the levelling-down objection.

Even if we give up on attaching importance to personal identity when it comes to determining good and bad, we might still think it is important when it comes to determining right and wrong. To see this, consider an example from Parfit:

“We must decide whether to impose on some child some hardship. If we do, this will either (i) be for this child’s own greater benefit in adult life, or (ii) be for the similar benefit of someone else – such as this child’s younger brother. Does it matter morally whether (i) or (ii) is true?” (1987: 333).

¹⁰ This form of egalitarianism has recently been defended by Asheim and Zuber (2014). On the levelling-down objection, see Parfit (1991).

Even if we think that the difference doesn't matter, in the sense that imposing a hardship is just as good in case (i) as in case (ii), we might think that it is nonetheless forbidden in the latter but permitted in the former. Personal identity makes a difference in permissibility, even if it doesn't make a difference in value. This is another way in which personal identity might be important.

This is the topic of Chapter 4: **"People in Suitcases"**. I argue that deontic constraints cannot be combined with the attractive idea of acting in everyone's interest. I show this by means of cases where agents need to make multiple decisions across time. I then argue that these problems force us to choose between orthodox deontology and broadly consequentialist views, and that we should opt for the latter. I also sketch a vindication of Harsanyi's use of the veil of ignorance. The chapter ends by suggesting that it is utilitarian consequentialism rather than standard deontology that can truly give importance to flesh-and-blood people rather than the abstract idea of personhood.

In the final two chapters I go back to some of the issues posed by Broome's initial example of the value of prolonging a life.

Recall that his example was meant to illustrate why we might care about whether a new life has just begun or is instead just about to begin. As Broome puts it in the passage cited above, "[m]any people would be inclined to think this small blip in the diagram makes all the difference to the problem" (2004: 10).

Note that this is true regardless of the size of the blip. If the blip is there at all, the example is about prolonging a life; if it isn't it, it is about creating a new life. We might think this is problematic as it appears to be a case of implausibly extreme sensitivity to arbitrarily small nonevaluative differences.

We might try to rule it out by appealing to the principle of hypersensitivity avoidance, according to which no two things can be arbitrarily close in nonevaluative terms but arbitrarily far apart in terms of value.¹¹

Hypersensitivity can arise in multiple dimensions and follows from a wide range of views. The first dimension is time. This is essentially what is going on in Broome's example. Another dimension is personhood itself, as it is plausible that whether something is a person at a given time depends on mental and physical features which come in degrees.¹²

But it is not clear why we should accept hypersensitivity avoidance and what its implications exactly are. The last two chapters try to capture some of the intuitions behind hypersensitivity avoidance in a more principled and more familiar framework.

Chapter 5: **“Transfinitely Transitive Value”** introduces transfinite transitivity and transfinite acyclicity which generalize familiar value-theoretic principles of transitivity and acyclicity and applies these transfinite principles to the problem of evaluating outcomes where different numbers of people exist. I use these principles to argue that it is always good to add good lives, bad to add bad lives, and neutral to add neutral lives, where the value of a life is understood as the value for its subject. This conclusion rules out many prominent theories of how to compare outcomes where different numbers of people exist, such as average and critical level utilitarianism, and it allows us to reduce variable population axiology to fixed population axiology. Transfinite transitivity has a clearer motivation than hypersensitivity avoidance, it can play much of the same role in value theory, and it is also, in some respects, more liberal. The chapter also shows how these axiological conclusions can be used to support a limited version of the so-called procreative asymmetry.

¹¹ I take this principle, with small changes, from Pummer (2019).

¹² This is the dimension that Pummer (2019) focuses on.

Chapter 6: “**Transfinite Transitivity and Rational Choice**” aims to support transfinite transitivity by showcasing its role in the theory of rational choice. It argues that its role in compact option sets is broadly like that of transitivity in finite option sets. That role is to secure the existence of choiceworthy options, secure consistency of choice across different situations, and to protect agents from money pumps. The distinctions developed in this chapter are then applied to a classic infinite decision puzzle, Satan’s Apple.

I hope that this thesis provides multiple viable routes, not necessarily driven by metaphysics, to a picture of morality where personal identity plays a lesser role than it does in much of our current moral thinking.

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