



Environment & Society



White Horse Press

Full citation:

Grey, William, "Possible Persons and the Problems of Posterity."  
*Environmental Values* 5, no. 2, (1996): 161-179  
<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5575>

Rights:

All rights reserved. © The White Horse Press 1996. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism or review, no part of this article may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, including photocopying or recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission from the publisher. For further information please see <http://www.whpress.co.uk/>

## Possible Persons and the Problems of Posterity

WILLIAM GREY

*Department of Philosophy  
University of Queensland  
Brisbane 4072, Australia  
email: wgrey@lingua.cltr.uq.edu.au*

**ABSTRACT:** The moral status of future persons is problematic. It is often claimed that we should take the interests of the indefinite unborn very seriously, because they have a right to a decent life. It is also claimed (often by the same people) that we should allow unrestricted access to abortion, because the indefinite unborn have no rights. In this paper I argue that these intuitions are not in fact inconsistent. The aim is to provide an account of trans-temporal concern which resolves the *prima facie* inconsistency between commonly held intuitions about our obligations to future persons. I argue that our intuitions can be reconciled provided that we explicate obligations to the future in terms of impersonal principles subject to retroactive person-affecting constraints.

**KEYWORDS:** Future persons, duty to posterity, Parfit

An important task of environmental ethics is to clarify and articulate the values and principles which underlie our obligations to the future. These obligations are of central concern to environmental philosophers, who are generally disposed to take the interests of the indefinite unborn seriously, above all because it seems intuitively clear that the denizens of the future have a right to a decent life. It is also claimed however (often by the same people) that we should allow unrestricted access to abortion, because the indefinite unborn have no rights.<sup>1</sup>

The moral status of future persons is therefore problematic. It seems intuitively that future individuals have a right to a decent environment – but no right to life. This appears to be an instance of the sort of predicament which Derek Parfit has described, where we have beliefs ‘that we cannot justify, and that we know to be inconsistent’. In this paper I will argue that these intuitions are not in fact inconsistent, but to avoid inconsistency we must carefully attend to the character of diachronic obligation. I will suggest that although there is a *prima facie* problem, it is not insurmountable. We should indeed be concerned about the welfare of future individuals, but our justification of this concern needs to be articulated with care.

One aim of this paper therefore is to provide an account of trans-temporal concern which resolves the *prima facie* inconsistency between commonly held intuitions about our obligations to future persons. I will argue that our intuitions can be reconciled provided that we explicate obligations to the future in terms of impersonal principles subject to retroactive person-affecting constraints.

Our practical thinking is much too inclined to dismiss considerations concerning the medium and long-term future; it is only comparatively recently that a serious attempt has been made to fill this lacuna. The issues are vexing and bristle with paradox but they cannot be ignored. Much of the concern with these problems was initiated by puzzles first raised by utilitarian thinkers, in particular Jan Narveson (1967, 1973), though as Parfit (1976a, p. 100) points out they are problems for anyone who gives some weight to utilitarian principles.

One of the practical consequences of this inquiry is to expose the dangers of careless thinking about our obligations to posterity. If we are to think consistently about our obligations to the future we need to exercise care in formulating the chronological perspective of our judgements. Failure to attend to the chronological perspective of future-oriented judgements is the principal source of inconsistency and paradox in this domain. It is unconscionable to discount or dismiss obligations to the future on the basis of our present ignorance or the future's present indeterminacy.<sup>2</sup>

#### JUSTIFYING CONCERN FOR POSTERITY

The problems which emerge here are at least in part concerned with the ontological status of 'future individuals' – persons who do not exist now but will exist later. Parfit has, I think, shown that it is a challenging task to provide a smooth and coherent theory which captures all of our pre-reflective intuitions about what we owe the future.

There are two sorts of problems which we confront when we raise concerns about the future. First, assuming that there are going to be future generations of humans, we can provisionally disregard questions about the composition and identity of the population and ask what obligations we owe them. Second, there is the question of the implications of the fact that we are able to affect not just the conditions under which future generations will live, but also to determine their composition and identity.

I will concentrate mainly on the second set of issues, though I note in passing that if we believed that the world was a few millennia old, and was in any case to be terminated in the fairly near future, then concern for posterity would be largely pointless. Only when our horizons have been expanded a bit can we develop an appropriate scale of concern for the future. However if we expand our horizons *too* much then once again we lose the plot – or at least so I have argued in 'Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology' (Grey 1993).

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

If we do admit a suitably expansive viewpoint that allows that the concerns of posterity should be taken into consideration, then the question arises of the theoretical basis or justification for this concern. Certainly contract theories about individual rights seem to face an immediate difficulty because future individuals do not seem to be in a position to enter into agreements, or indeed make any claims at all. Contract theories seem to be of limited assistance here because contracts obtain between contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

Parfit is concerned with the difficulty we face in finding a suitable theoretical framework to justify some widely shared intuitions about what we owe posterity. One of these intuitions, which we might call the Principle of Chronological Impartiality, is that the interests of individuals should not be disregarded, or discounted, on the grounds of temporal remoteness, any more than they should be on the grounds of spatial remoteness.<sup>4</sup> To do so would be a form of *chronochauvinism*. But how are we to make sense of the claim that the interests of future individuals, who do not exist yet, and may never exist, should be taken account of by those who exist at present?

There are a number of reactions to this problem. John Passmore (1974, Ch. 4) suggests that our concern for the future is based on love, not justice. Our future-oriented concern for our grandchildren may include concern about their concern for their grandchildren, and this may provide a basis for a chain of concern which stretches into the future. However a consequence of Passmore's view is that we owe nothing to unlovable futures.<sup>5</sup> And since it seems to be within our power to bring about societies which we would find quite unlovable, there is a problem of explaining, on Passmore's account, why it is objectionable to bring about such a state of affairs.

Martin Golding reaches a similar conclusion to Passmore from a different direction. Golding suggests that we extend moral concern only to those who are part of our moral community, and membership of the club depends on having a shared social ideal. Golding limits obligations to immediate posterity: 'the more distant the generation we focus on, the less likely it is that we have an obligation to promote its good' (Golding 1972, p. 70).

Parfit raises a serious objection to discounting the future: 'At a discount rate of five per cent, one death next year counts for more than a billion deaths in 500 years' (Parfit 1984, p. 357). Even modest discount rates will lead us to disregard any interests whatsoever a few centuries or millennia hence.<sup>6</sup>

Parfit's observation I think points to a deep reluctance to deliberately exclude the interests of even distant posterity from consideration. But paradox also emerges when we attempt to include the interests of posterity in our deliberations. Annette Baier has also drawn attention to the difficulty of devising an appropriate framework for considering the interests of the temporally remote. Baier believes that our responsibilities reach back in time as well as forward:

... we should recognise obligations of piety to past persons and responsibility to future ones. I do not think that either utilitarian theories or contractarian theories, or any

version of any moral theory I am familiar with, captures the right reasons for the right attitudes to past and future persons. Perhaps we need a new theory, but the 'intuitions' it will ground are, I believe, very old ones. (Baier 1981, p. 178)

I will not consider the problems of making sense of obligations to past persons. I will examine only the problem of making sense of our obligation to the future, which Parfit explores with some extensive, ingenious and at times tortuous argument. Parfit's aim is to devise a formulation of what he calls the Principle of Beneficence (1984, p. 366), which is a general moral principle which will provide guidance about how to benefit people, and protect them from harm. Parfit calls the target principle Theory X, which if it existed would be a very remarkable principle indeed. It would solve what Parfit calls the Non-Identity Problem and the Mere Addition Paradox, avoid the so-called Repugnant and Absurd Conclusions and help us to determine an optimum world human population level.

In a revealing analogy,<sup>7</sup> Parfit likens our existing moral principles to Newtonian laws, which provide reliable guidance under ordinary conditions but which break down in extreme circumstances. For Parfit the Non-Identity Problem provides a moral counterpart to the Michelson-Morley experiment, revealing the limitations of traditional moral principles, in particular the principle of utility. John Wheeler has remarked *a propos* of the search for a unified theory in physics: 'Some day a door will surely open and expose the glittering central mechanism of the world in its beauty and simplicity' (Misner 1973, p. 1197). Parfit's aim is to find a principle which is a counterpart in moral theory of Wheeler's dream. Theory X stands to the principle of utility as a Grand Unified Theory (or Theory of Everything) in physics stands to Newtonian dynamics.

Wheeler's dream may be a reasonable aspiration in physics, but it is not hard to have misgivings about such grand synthesising ambitions in moral theory. As David Wiggins and Bernard Williams have said:

In the case of moral philosophy what defines the subject is a highly heterogeneous set of human concerns, many of them at odds with many others of them... There is no question of a secret axiological ordering principle... (Wiggins 1977, pp. xxiv-v.)

One misgiving which can be raised about the Wiggins-Williams conception is their restriction of the heterogeneous material which provide the substance of morality to 'human' concerns. I will not pursue that issue here.<sup>8</sup> Parfit's ambition is precisely to discover an 'axiological ordering principle' – that is just what Theory X is. Parfit's search however is, he confesses, ultimately unsuccessful. I suspect that it is also misguided. But even if the Wiggins-Williams heterogeneity claim raises doubts about the viability of Parfit's project there is much of value in his discussion.<sup>9</sup>

Even if the task of finding a single principle like Theory X is unpromising, something like Parfit's project is difficult to avoid. In making decisions about

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

allocating resources for saving lives or improving the quality of life, judgments have to be made about the value of and the length and quality of life. This surely does require some calculative theoretical framework for choosing among various distribution options.<sup>10</sup> Parfit is right to draw our attention to the fact that the task of devising such a framework becomes enormously difficult when we introduce diachronic considerations and their attendant shifts in the domains of potential beneficiaries and maleficiaries.<sup>11</sup> This is the central aspect of Parfit's Non-Identity Problem which I want to address.

## THE REPUGNANT DILEMMA: PERSONAL OR IMPERSONAL CONCERN FOR THE FUTURE?

To help us to get our bearings I will sketch a rough map of Parfit's dialectical labyrinth and the key intuitions which Parfit thinks are very hard to square with a consistent set of justificatory beliefs. Parfit's aim is to devise a target theory, Theory X, which is a principle to provide guidance for allocating benefits and harms, in particular benefits and harms affecting the denizens of the future. This theory can take either a 'person affecting' or an impersonal form.<sup>12</sup> An impersonal principle (of utility) might take the form:

(1) We should do what most decreases misery and increases happiness.

Impersonal formulations are perfectly general injunctions which make no reference to particular individuals. Such formulations however have counterintuitive consequences when applied to the future. The problem with them is that they are too strong because they make demands on us which are unacceptable. Parfit's favourite example of the unacceptable consequences of impersonal principles is what he calls the Repugnant Conclusion. This is the conclusion that we should produce ever more people, provided that their coming to be leads to an increase in overall happiness – that is, their misery does not outweigh their happiness.

The Repugnant Conclusion seems to give us a good reason for wanting our principle to take the alternative person-affecting form. A person-affecting formulation of the principle of utility might be:

(2) We should do what harms people the least and benefits them most.

On a person-affecting view, an action is wrong only if it makes someone worse off than they would otherwise have been. This avoids the Repugnant Conclusion, but it also has counterintuitive consequences when applied to the future. The problem with the principle in this form is that it is too weak: it seems to allow much which is intuitively objectionable. This is illustrated by various counterexamples, such as the counterexample of Depletion.

Consider two alternative policies. Policy B, the policy of depletion, produces short-term benefits but long term costs – resource depletion and environmental degradation, perhaps. Policy A has fewer short-term benefits, but greater benefits in the long-term. Anyone who exists in 100 years if policy B is adopted would be worse off than anyone who would exist then if A were adopted. But if one effect of policy B is to bring it about that there is a different set of individuals to those who would have existed under policy A, then there will be no one who is worse off under policy B than under policy A. If no one is worse off no matter which policy is adopted, it seems that on person-affecting grounds it does not matter how we choose.

Not only is no one worse off, it actually seems that the future individuals who inherit the bad environment under policy B actually benefit. They should actually be grateful, because the adverse circumstances which they inherit are a necessary condition for their existence. The occupants of the better world who would have existed if policy A had been adopted would of course be just as grateful about the outcome on *this* score.

Parfit also illustrates how the Non-Identity problem generates a need for impersonal principles with a simplified version of the problem: the case of the 14-year-old girl who chooses to have a child immediately rather than wait a few years (Parfit 1984, pp. 358-361). ‘It would be better if she waited’, one might think. But it cannot be said that her refusal to delay having the child is worse *for her child*, because had she delayed *that child* would not have existed. Betterness here cannot be construed in person-affecting terms.

The dilemma is this. When we try to formulate a principle to provide guidance for future-oriented actions it will take either an impersonal or a person-affecting form. If it takes an impersonal form we reach the Repugnant Conclusion or one of its variants. If our principle takes a person-affecting form however, then it seems that it does not matter what we do, because nothing we do will make anyone worse off than they would otherwise have been. But surely most of us believe *both* that it does matter what we do *and* that we are not obliged to accept an obligation for relentless reproduction in the face of an ever-declining standard of average well-being.

#### PARFIT’S NON-IDENTITY PROBLEM

Parfit has uncovered and developed some real difficulties in an important class of cases which may have been given less attention than they deserve. Most discussion about culpable harm takes it for granted that there must be people made worse off by the act which causes that harm. Our actions make something worse for them. Discussion tends to focus on whether there really is harm or how it might be compensated. Parfit’s cases are problematic because they do not produce a result worse for anybody, not because the results are not bad, but

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

because of the peculiar character of the class of persons affected. But for the policy they would not have existed.<sup>13</sup> A compensating ‘benefit’ of the policy is the bringing into existence of the individuals harmed by the policy. They benefit provided that starting to exist is a benefit.<sup>14</sup>

The crucial feature of the problem is that it involves a domain shift in the class of moral beneficiaries, which changes over time. Because moral thinking is typically synchronic it is adapted to a static domain, and even its extension to animals, ecosystems, etc, shares the same static character.<sup>15</sup> This is *not* to deny that moral thought is often preoccupied with consequences – that is, causal outcomes, some of which may be far-reaching. But the outcomes considered are typically temporally proximate; that is outcomes which do not involve time-spans that would introduce any significant change in the domain of individuals which might be affected by our choices. Moral thinking is synchronic in the sense that is overwhelmingly concerned with contemporaries. The problem of accommodating diachronic inter-generational moral thought depends crucially on successfully accommodating this genuinely dynamic character.<sup>16</sup>

There are a number of intuitions which have conspired to produce our predicament. One, which we have noted, is the intuition that the moral claims of individuals should not be compromised by their temporal remoteness. Intuitively, actions which are likely to adversely affect individuals located in the distant future are just as reprehensible as actions which are likely to adversely affect individuals remote in space.<sup>17</sup> It certainly *seems* that we can bring about a situation in which the life of future individuals will be worse than it might have been. But how are we to explain what’s wrong with such actions if no one is made worse off?

The claim that our choices can have bad outcomes, even very bad outcomes, yet leave no one worse off, rests in turn on several assumptions. These include (a) the identity of an individual depends on the time or circumstances of that individual’s conception, you could not have been born a month earlier or later and be the same individual;<sup>18</sup> and (b), reproductive patterns and the resulting population composition can be affected by social policy choices. Parfit claims that the cumulative effect of major social decisions can affect the composition and identity of a population. I don’t disagree with Parfit about the sensitivity of population identity to contingent policy perturbations. Indeed I don’t think that he makes the point half strongly enough.

If we imagine an alternative history with a different sequence of technological innovations – one which did not include the invention of motor cars, say, or one in which penicillin was discovered fifty years earlier in 1878 – then a different set of individuals would have resulted, which would almost certainly have not included anyone alive today. Even relatively trivial changes would have produced a cumulative cascade of consequences. Our identity, individually and collectively depends on what Stephen J. Gould has nicely called a ‘fragile continuity’.<sup>19</sup> As Gould says ‘Humans are here today because our particular line



never fractured – never once at any of the billion points that could have erased us from history’ (Gould 1993, p. 229). What’s true of the species is true of each individual member of the species, with the proviso that the continuity for individuals is orders of magnitude more fragile, as the potential points of fracture that could have erased each of us from history are billions-fold greater.<sup>20</sup>

#### THE NEED FOR IMPERSONAL PRINCIPLES

If you accept the policy-dependence of the identity of human populations (Parfit’s ‘Non-Identity Problem’), and if you also believe that we should be concerned about the interests of persons who will exist in the remote future, the principles to substantiate this concern cannot take a person affecting form. Because some policy choices can have bad outcomes even if they leave no one worse off, concern about the future has to be expressed through impersonal formulations. It seems that we can justify our intuitions about these cases only if we accept an impersonal (or non-person-affecting) form of principles.

But having introduced impersonal principles, how do we avoid the Repugnant Conclusion: the obligation to produce an ever larger population at ever decreasing levels of well-being?<sup>21</sup> One suggestion is to reject the maximising form of the total view of (1) in favour of the so-called average view. Parfit has a counterexample to block this manoeuvre: the Paradox of Mere Addition. The average view entails that it would be wrong to produce slightly less happy people, even in a world where the level of satisfaction is already high, because that will reduce the average level of well being.<sup>22</sup>

Parfit’s Mere Addition Paradox can be stated as follows (following Tooley 1983, Ch. 7). Let A be a world with 100 people, each enjoying 100 units of happiness. Let A+ be a world differing only in having 100 additional happy people (who do not affect the original occupants in any way) each enjoying 10 units of happiness. Now consider world B with 200 people each enjoying 60 units of happiness. B is better than A+ (it has a higher total and average quantity of happiness). A+ is no worse than A (it differs from A only in having more happy people). So B is not worse than A. This argument can then be iterated generating ever more populous worlds whose occupants enjoy ever lower levels of well-being, which, it seems are no worse than the initial world A all of whose occupants enjoyed a high level of well-being. Note we are not arguing B is better than A, only that it is not worse.<sup>23</sup>

This is a slippery argument. Tooley suggests that it is not as plausible as it first appears. It is defective because we accept that A+ is no worse than A because the additional people in A+ are independent from and do not affect the original occupants in A. However if the additional persons in A+ are genuinely isolated there is no possibility of more equitable redistributions. But one of the principle grounds for preferring B to A+ is precisely because of the more equitable

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

distribution of goods, that is, the additional people are *not* being treated as an isolated group in the same way.

## HARE'S EXTENDED GOLDEN RULE

One way in which an impersonally formulated Principle of Beneficence might lead to the Repugnant Conclusion is if we thought that becoming actual was a benefit which is conferred by parents on merely possible individuals. Richard Hare seems to accept such a model in a notorious paper 'Abortion and the Golden Rule'. Hare suggests that a plausible extension of the 'Golden Rule' – that we should do to others as we wish them to do to us – is that 'we should do to others what we are glad was done to us' (Hare 1975: 208). If we allow this extension, Hare suggests, there is a *prima facie* obligation to produce more people. Indeed, alarmingly, 'from my gladness [at being born], in conjunction with the extended Golden Rule, I derive not only a duty not to abort, but a duty not to abstain from procreation' (Hare 1975: 212). Hare's extended Golden Rule leads him to a particularly repugnant form of the Repugnant Conclusion.

There are a number of points on which Hare has been challenged, but the one I want to single out is his assumption that we were once possible individuals waiting to be actualised. Actualisation is a defective model for starting to exist. Hare supposes that we were once potential persons, who, thanks to the care and attention on the part of our parents, were actualised. But that is a mistake. It was never the case that we were occupants of the ante-chamber to the existence room, waiting to be helped over the threshold by our obliging parents.<sup>24</sup> Bringing us into existence is not something which our parents did to us – though of course they brought it about that we exist.<sup>25</sup>

If there are no merely possible or future individuals to whom concern can be extended, then there is nothing that could be 'actualised'. Because we never were possible persons actualisation is not something that was ever 'done' to us, and so is not something that we can be grateful for.<sup>26</sup> The 'others' to which the Golden Rule can extend thus includes only actual others, not mere *possibilia*. So Hare's suggestion that we should be grateful for what was done to us does not apply to our coming to be.

I believe that Hare's mistake comes about as follows. Because we recognise that we might not have existed (had the fragile continuity fractured) we think of ourselves as formerly-future individuals, and in entertaining this thought we confer a shadowy ontological status on ourselves as mere *possibilia* prior to our existence. And it is then tempting to suppose that the denizens of the future have the same sort of shadowy status now as we did prior to our conception. And Hare then supposes we should take the interests of these shadowy individuals just as seriously as he supposes our parents took our interests when we were shadowy individuals.

It seems to me that lurking behind Parfit's non-identity problem, which is the underlying source of his paradoxes, there is a comparable misconception. The puzzles arise in cases where the persons who would have been better off are a different set of individuals to those who would have been worse off under different choices. The assumption is made that the goodness or badness of choices made at a particular time can be cashed out in terms of the effects they have on the persons who exist at the later time. But the change in the composition of a population which occurs over time means that the way that goodness and badness is characterised at the later time may be inapplicable to the former time. That is, one basic source of Parfit's puzzles is a rather static or atemporal conception of the problem.

The dynamic character of the problem manifests itself variously. Importantly, how future individuals later come to feel about the choices that we make is not a simple and straightforward factor that can help us to determine how we should evaluate alternatives now. Indeed, I suggest that the upshot of Parfit's argument is to show us that they cannot. A future-oriented preference, which may acquire a specific content in the future, need not be specific now.

This comes out clearly I think in considering the example of Depletion. World A and world B of the future can be judged only from an impersonal perspective at the present, though it will later be the case that a person-affecting perspective will be available from one or other of these worlds. That is to say, a person-affecting perspective will be available from either of world A or world B. But antecedently there is no one who could say that they would have been better off if the policy leading to world A had been adopted. In framing our judgements it is important to be sensitive to the temporal standpoint from which the judgement is made.

If we accept an obligation not to make a future generation worse off from our present standpoint we can *at this time* admit no finer-grained description. However phrases like 'that generation' are ambiguous. They could mean people living at that later time, whoever they are (allowing that there is no possibility of enumerating them) or that particular (determinate) set of individuals. The latter characterisation however is not available to us now, though it will of course come to be available later.

Parfit's puzzles I suggest stem from an attempt to combine disparate chronological perspectives of assessment. The conflicting intuitions arise when they are not properly temporally relativised. The incommensurability of disparate chronological perspectives can be illustrated with a story.

Suppose that God makes us an offer. After surveying the global environment God says: 'The planet is in poor shape and deteriorating. There are serious problems with species loss, deforestation, desertification and salination. I'm going to make a one-off offer. I'll wind the clock back 200 years and we'll try it all over again. This time we'll get it right. I'll make sure that planetary and species interests are respected. There's a catch though. You won't be in the script

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

this time around.' I think we should reply: 'Well God, if you *really* wind the clock back as you say, writing us out of the script won't matter a bit. For you will then be considering alternatives from a perspective that is quite impersonal with respect to us and our interests and the interests which we express now can quite properly be discounted.'<sup>27</sup>

We can apply this pattern of reasoning to Parfit's case of the 14-year old girl. Suppose we say that it would have been better if the 14-year-old girl had waited and had a child later. If we say this, Parfit says, then we are saying that it is true of this child that it would be better if it did not exist.<sup>28</sup> But this is wrong. We are saying, rather, that it would have been better if the child had not existed. That is an *impersonal* judgment framed from a standpoint *supplanted* subsequently (and thereafter discounted) by the change brought about by the existence of the child.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly in the case of the example of Depletion, the preferences of the B-world occupants are not ones which can exercise any purchase on us now. We still have reason for preferring the A-world. Our failure to respect future interests would result in a generation being worse off than it would otherwise have been, even though the composition of that generation would be changed. The moral principle which underpins this preference must take an impersonal rather than a person-affecting form.

Analogously, it is perfectly in order for us to say that (a) our forebears acted reprehensibly, and their behaviour is to be deplored, and (b) without their deplorable behaviour we would not have existed, and (c) we are glad that we do exist. It is important to be clear about the changing temporal standpoint which underlies the different component of this complex conjunctive judgment.

Again, if I were to secretly bury some toxic waste on a site subsequently developed, later occupants of the site might have a legitimate and actionable grievance against me.<sup>30</sup> I could not defend myself by claiming that the plaintiff was not born when I buried the waste; nor would it be relevant to observe that one consequence of my action was to bring it about that the individual who purchased the site was different to any individual who would have purchased the site if the waste had not been buried there. That is, we can wrong a person by bringing it about that that person is adversely affected by our actions even if the aggrieved did not exist at the time of our actions.

## GLAD TO BE ALIVE?

Parfit in some passages seems to suggest that if we are grateful for our existence we should be grateful for all the necessary conditions for our existence. That is surely wrong, for it generates some extremely counterintuitive consequences. The first world war was a monumental act of human folly; its absence would very likely have made this a better century, though I think it would then be a century

which would have included hardly anyone alive today. The fact that we are glad to be around does not mean that we must be glad for all the necessary causal antecedents for our being around.

In general, being grateful for something need not involve being grateful for all the necessary conditions for that thing. It is important to appreciate this point if we are to block a line of argument which proceeds as follows. My existence is a precondition for any goods which I enjoy, and therefore if I am grateful for anything at all, it follows that I should be grateful for my existence. One trouble with this argument is precisely the assumption that being grateful for something involves being grateful for all the necessary conditions for that thing.

In the case of our existence, in particular, there is no shortage of awful necessary conditions. But for the first world war my grandparents would not have met, and my parents would not have existed, and so I would not have existed. There is no inconsistency in being glad that *X*, recognising that *Y* is a necessary condition for *X*, and regretting *Y*. Being grateful for existing, then, need not involve being grateful for all the necessary conditions for one's existence.

#### IS EXISTENCE A BENEFIT?

One way that we might think that an impersonally formulated principle of Beneficence might lead to the Repugnant Conclusion is if starting to exist were a benefit. If causing someone to exist benefits them, and if an impersonal maximisation principle should guide future-oriented actions, then that would provide grounds for accepting (*inter alia*) Hare's procreational profligacy. But does causing someone to exist benefit them? Parfit does not endorse this view though he thinks that it is defensible.<sup>31</sup>

One view is that existence is not a benefit but a precondition for any benefit (or harm). But Parfit points out that if we deny that existence is a benefit it is hard to explain why a long life is preferable to a short one. If continuing to exist is a benefit, then surely existing is. One response is to say that starting to exist is not a benefit, but continuing to exist is. Another is to say continuing to exist is a benefit, but ceasing to exist is not a harm. Perhaps it is a very peculiar benefit which is such that its loss is costless, but as Parfit (1984: 490) says, the benefit of life, if it is a benefit, is going to have some peculiar characteristics.<sup>32</sup>

The question whether existence is properly regarded as a benefit or not is relevant to a problematic pair of intuitions, which Parfit believes that his Theory X should be able to explain. This is a problem which Parfit calls the Asymmetry (Parfit 1984: Ch. 18).<sup>33</sup> The two intuitions are:

- (a) we are obliged not to produce unhappy persons, and
- (b) we are not obliged to produce happy persons

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

Person-affecting justifications support (b), but not (a) – they do not explain why we should refrain from producing unhappy persons. Impersonal justifications will support (a) but not (b) – they do not give reasons why it’s all right to refrain from conception. Once again there is something crucial about the time of judgment. What creates the trouble again in this case is the attempt to combine different chronological perspectives of assessment.

The problem is that our future-oriented obligations are either too onerous or not onerous enough. Either we owe the future nothing (on a person-affecting view anything goes) or we have quite powerful obligations to an indefinitely large class of possible individuals.

This is another manifestation of the domain problem. Either we take the class of moral patients to be the class of presently existing individuals, which is far too narrow, or we take them to be the class of merely possible individuals, and that is far too wide. Intuitively, however, we have some obligations but not the same and not as onerous obligations to the future as we do to the present.

Future-oriented concern must be expressed through impersonal principles, but person-affecting constraints must be introduced to avoid the Repugnant Conclusion. In particular, what matters are the person-affecting consequences of our actions, though because of the ontological status of the ‘individuals’ about whom we are concerned, the principles which express this concern must be formulated in an impersonal form.

## DIAGNOSING THE PROBLEM

I suggest that our intuitions about Parfit’s non-identity problem are problematic because we illegitimately transfer facts which are relevant to one chronological perspective (such as the fact of our existence) to a distinct chronological perspective where they have no bearing at all.

Conflict in our modes of assessment can arise in different ways. There can be conflict between principles. There can also be a problem because the same principle is applied to different domains. In the present case, in particular, insufficient attention has been paid to the diachronic character of the relation of obligation. The time of assessment here plays a crucial role.

We never were possible persons, though that is a retrospective status which we confer on individuals *after* they begin to exist. But because we *now* regard ourselves as once-possible persons, it seems irresistible to suppose that we *were* possible persons *then*. But that is a mistake. It is just this sort of metaphysical superstition that led to the indignant letter to *The Times* reported by Parfit in his discussion of the case of the 14-year-old girl.<sup>34</sup> Provided that we are careful not to conflate disparate chronological perspectives, the thought that it would have been better if she had waited and not had a child is *not* the same as the thought that it would have been better if *that* child had never been born. In these cases it

is important to ask not just *whether* a particular action is good or better, but *when* is it good or better. It is crucial to be clear about this if we are to avoid incoherence in wanting to exist, and also wanting certain conditions to be satisfied which are not compatible with our existence – such as the world environment thought experiment.

When does a diachronic obligation obtain? Perhaps a spatial analogy can help. If we shoot an arrow into the thicket and injure no one, then we may have acted recklessly, but have been fortunate. If we were to embark on a massively profligate policy (Policy B) and the age of mammals concludes in fifty years – when planet Earth is struck (say) by Comet Shoemaker-Levy 13, or when we get cleaned up when a stellar neighbour goes supernova – then we have been ‘lucky’, as in the arrow case. It turns out, fortuitously, that posterity is not harmed by our present actions. Our general obligations to ‘suppositious’ individuals are never called in. However on the assumption that there are no major catastrophes in the offing it seems to me that we should recognise impersonal obligations to the future because of the *eventual* person-affecting consequences of our actions.<sup>35</sup>

The B-world people in the case considered above have got a legitimate complaint. They can consistently say, ‘If this were a better world we would not be here. And we like being here. But it would have been better if they had chosen otherwise. Our existence does not justify their choices, because it was not a relevant fact at the time that those choices were made.’ Their judgement is based on person-affecting principles: the earlier actions which they condemn are deplorable because of their effects on *them*. Nevertheless at the earlier time, when those actions were contemplated or undertaken, their adverse consequences would *then* have been specifiable only in impersonal terms.

Parfit’s Non-Identity Problem brings out the way that policies may affect the composition of future generations and it obliges us to adopt general obligations, but this does not commit us to the total view. Although one can determine (or at least influence) a population size by means of policy instruments, one cannot choose the population. That is, one can choose *how many* people may exist, but not *who* exists.

## CONCLUSION

I do not claim to have answered all of Parfit’s perplexities, but I tried to diagnose where much of the difficulty lies. The heart of the problem concerns the character of diachronic obligation. I have tried to sketch how we should construe diachronic obligation to the remote future and its merely possible denizens.

In particular we need to formulate principles which take account of the time delay which is built into many of our future-oriented actions and choices. We need to recognise impersonal obligations because we need to recognise constraints on actions which can affect persons, even though there are not (now) persons who we can now affect. We are adversely affected by deforestation in

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

the last century, even though this policy did not – could not – affect *us* then. Moreover a different and more beneficent policy may well have resulted in a population of beneficiaries that may not have included us. We can now see how to set about working out ways of giving some weight to such delayed outcomes in our deliberations. Parfit has pointed to the difficulty of the task of characterising these obligations when the delays are such as to affect the identity of a population.

In ignoring interests of future generations our actions, when performed, may not jeopardise anyone's interests. But the subsequent effect is certainly to jeopardise some interests. So it is at least risky, and reckless, to act thus. It will subsequently come about that we will have acted unjustly. The chronological injustice is conditional on the subsequent existence of individuals in a dispreferred state – that is, in a state *they* would prefer not to be in even though, in the nature of the case, individuals in a more fortunate state would not have been *them*.

If one rejects realism about the future and maintains that the future is something we should be concerned about, any principles to substantiate this intuition cannot take a person affecting form. The problem of maintaining that (a) there are no determinate future individuals (because which ones exist depend on our choices), and (b) we should be concerned about 'their' welfare, is an aspect of Parfit's non-identity problem but it is not completely intractable. Some choices can be bad even though they make no one worse off now. We can block the conclusion that all policy choices are self-validating by accepting impersonal principles, general obligations which are delayed action conditional ones – retroactive person affecting principles.

What is the practical upshot of these reflections? Moral thinking is typically synchronic, perhaps because we have been disinclined – or have not needed – to take account of the long-term consequences of our actions. Perhaps for most of human history our actions have either had few long-term effects – or ones which we have been unaware of, perhaps through ignorance. I think that it is only comparatively recently that thinkers like Parfit have made a serious attempt to address the problems which arise in connection with diachronic duties. I said at the outset that I would say little about the moral status of foetuses. However it is worth noting that a lot of the debate about the rights of foetuses arise from so-called potentiality arguments: a particular status is afforded the individual now in virtue of properties which it will *subsequently* acquire. One upshot of the above argument I think is that this pattern of thought is flawed, embodying a similar fault to the one which I have criticised in Parfit and Hare. A second upshot, and my final remark, is that much of our thinking in practical domains, e.g. science, engineering, social policy, is too synchronic, that is, much too disposed to disregard or discount the medium and long-term future. As Parfit shows, trying to make sense of diachronic duty is problematic, but I believe it is an vitally important dimension of practical reasoning which we ignore at our peril.<sup>36</sup>



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Authors whose views incorporate this uneasy tension include Jan Narveson, Joel Feinberg, James Rachels and Peter Singer. The *prima facie* inconsistency between intuitions about obligations to future persons has also been commented on by James Sterba (1980).

<sup>2</sup> Another practical corollary of the analysis concerns population policy. In particular, restrictive population policies do not adversely affect persons who might otherwise have existed.

<sup>3</sup> They also usually obtain only between equals or at least individuals with some reasonable parity of status. The ontological status of future individuals disqualifies them from entering into contracts. David Schmitz (personal communication) has suggested the possibility of using proxies to represent the interests of future generations in contractual negotiations. I think the metaphysical indeterminacy of future individuals makes this approach unpromising, although the interests of non-humans and non-rational humans might be articulated (though not very convincingly in my view) in terms of contract theories by such a device.

<sup>4</sup> Schmitz has challenged this, claiming that most people in fact believe that obligations to spatially proximate individuals are more onerous than to remote ones. We need to distinguish however between negative duties of non-interference and positive duties to provide assistance and aid: it is the stronger negative duties that are not subject to spatial attenuation.

<sup>5</sup> Schmitz has claimed that it is illegitimate to shift from talking about loving grandchildren to talk about loving future societies. If that is so it underlines the inadequacy of Passmore's suggestion to provide a general basis for future-oriented concern.

<sup>6</sup> We could soften this consequence by introducing a variable and declining discount rate for the future. But this sort of tinkering does nothing to establish the appropriateness, or plausibility, of precisely quantified discount models.

<sup>7</sup> From which he distances himself a little by calling it 'too grandiose' (Parfit 1984, p. 371).

<sup>8</sup> So although the present discussion is human (or person) chauvinist, the diachronic considerations developed here can be appropriately extended in a suitably generalised account.

<sup>9</sup> The heterogeneity claim is not of course intended by Wiggins and Williams to be a counsel of despair about the viability of moral discussion and argument. It is directed only against the suggestion that there might be some straightforward principle(s) that will provide reliable guidance on all moral matters. The point does however provide an excuse for not attempting to track the detail of Parfit's argument in all its labyrinthine complexity.

<sup>10</sup> Parfit's argument has the calculative orientation that is characteristic of utilitarians. This orientation is sometimes treated with suspicion, but I do not see that it is objectionable *per se*. Even though we may accept the implausibility, if not absurdity, of the quantitative precision of a hedonic calculus, some sort of weighing up is an inescapable part of practical deliberation.

<sup>11</sup> A beneficiary is one who receives a gift or advantage. I have coined the word 'maleficiary' for one who incurs a cost or disadvantage. I don't like 'victim' because of (a) its particularity, (b) it connotes witting (perhaps malevolent) behaviour by an oppressor.

<sup>12</sup> Sterba (1991) distinguishes between *in rem* and *in personam* rights which are roughly coextensive with Parfit's impersonal and person-affecting formulations.

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

<sup>13</sup> This is reminiscent of a moral problem posed by animals which exist only so that we can eat them.

<sup>14</sup> The claim that starting to exist is a benefit is often challenged, though it is defended in Parfit (1984, Appendix G).

<sup>15</sup> Or as Parfit (1984, p. 356) puts it ‘Most of our moral thinking is about Same People Choices’.

<sup>16</sup> I believe that Parfit’s analysis of the problem, which is a *tour de force*, nevertheless is too static. This is illustrated, for example, in his dubious conception of a difference between ‘future’ people and ‘possible’ people. Future people are those who will exist whichever way we act. Possible people may or may not, depending on what we do. I reject the claim that there are any ‘future’ people – people who would have existed anyway – in any but the most limited sense.

<sup>17</sup> This theme of an analogy between spatial and temporal separation is taken up by others, e.g. Richard and Val Routley (1978).

<sup>18</sup> See Prior (1960); Kripke (1972). Prior called merely future individuals ‘suppositious’.

<sup>19</sup> To borrow one of Gould’s metaphors, if you were to rewind the tape of human history back a few centuries to the same starting point we would have ended up with a very different world today. Chaos theory has helped to sharpen these intuitions about radical contingency.

<sup>20</sup> Our existence is awesomely precarious. Each of us is an apex of a vast pyramid of billions of conceptions, reaching back over more than half a billion years. One spermatozoon out of place and you’re not even history – you’re *nothing*. Imagine a handicapper asking, half a billion years ago: what odds *your* existence?

<sup>21</sup> As Parfit says (1976b: 371), following Narveson (1967), the (utilitarian) aim is surely to make people happy, not to make happy people.

<sup>22</sup> There are also clearly unacceptable ways of improving the average, e.g. by eliminating those below average. There are a lot of ingenious variations of this counterexample in Parfit (1984, Ch. 19).

<sup>23</sup> One response to the Mere Addition Paradox worth considering is provided by Ronald Dworkin, who suggests that A and A+ are not strictly comparable (see McMahan 1981, p. 123, n. 32).

<sup>24</sup> Whatever our parents were thinking about at the time, I suggest, it wasn’t our welfare. And this is not merely because they were otherwise occupied, but for good metaphysical reasons.

<sup>25</sup> Tooley argues, rightly I think, that we never have obligations to possible persons to actualise them. But he also says that there could be no circumstances in which there is a generalised obligation to produce offspring. That is less clear. Procreation has often been regarded as a social duty, and though it is not now, there might be circumstances where a case could be made out. I agree with Tooley however that if there were a situation in which there was a generalised obligation to procreate it could not be coherently construed as an obligation to some possible ‘individuals’ to actualise ‘them’. There is nothing *prima facie* wrong with blocking possible persons.

<sup>26</sup> After conception there is a potential person, at least, so the situation is more problematic.

<sup>27</sup> For God to really wind back the clock he would have to change our ontological status and bring it about not just that we cease to exist, but cease *having existed*, and that would involve changing the past. At best God could only annihilate the world and create a successor world just like the world of 1794. To *really* wind the clock back 200 years God would have to bring it about that it was 1794 for the first time. However as Aristotle, and

various others before and since have observed, that cannot be done. Changing the past is beyond even the power of God (*Nichomachean Ethics*, 1139b6).

<sup>28</sup> Parfit writes: 'We may shrink from claiming, of this girl's actual child, that it would have been better if he had never existed. But, if we claimed earlier that it would be better if this girl waits, this is what we must claim' (Parfit 1984: 360).

<sup>29</sup> *When* would it have been better that *that* child did not exist? At no time. Before the child existed it would be better that the girl does not have *a* child. After the child exists the domain has irrevocably changed so that the former judgement is no longer available. Cf. Prior's discussion of it being conceivable but at no time possible that Mark Antony could have been born to the parents of Julius Caesar (Prior 1960).

<sup>30</sup> I owe this example to David Schmitz.

<sup>31</sup> See Parfit (1984, Appendix G).

<sup>32</sup> Parfit (1976a: 110) says that Narveson's view that one can't compare life with non-existence entails that saving a life is not a benefit. It's important to distinguish here between starting a life and continuing one. Obligations are often tricky in these cases. Subjectively, death can appear terrifying. But from an impersonal point of view it is hard to make sense of the problem. Objectively I can make sense of my death all right; but objectively it has no special significance. See Nagel (1970).

<sup>33</sup> The asymmetry has been defended, problematically, by Narveson; see McMahan (1981).

<sup>34</sup> Parfit (1984, p. 364).

<sup>35</sup> Similarly, bringing it about that humanity no longer exists may be a cause for *present* regret, even though it would not be a matter of regret *when it happens*.

<sup>36</sup> Thanks to Alan Holland, David Schmitz and an anonymous referee of *Environmental Values* for their critical comments on an earlier version of this paper. The influence of Derek Parfit is of course obvious throughout. I also record my thanks to Michael Tooley, Jack Smart, and discussants at various seminars where the paper has been presented.

## REFERENCES

- Baier, Annette 1981. 'The rights of past and future persons', in E. Partridge (ed.) *Responsibilities to Future Generations*, pp. 171-183. Buffalo: Prometheus Books.
- Elliot, Robert 1989. 'The rights of future people'. *Journal of Applied Philosophy* **6**: 159-169.
- Golding, Martin P. 1972. 'Obligations to future generations', *The Monist* **56**: 85-99. Reprinted in E. Partridge (ed) *Responsibilities to Future Generations*, pp. 61-72. Buffalo: Prometheus, 1981.
- Gould, Stephen J. 1993. *Eight Little Piggies*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Grey, William L. 1993. 'Anthropocentrism and Deep Ecology', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **71**: 463-475.
- Hare, R.M. 1975. 'Abortion and the Golden Rule', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* **4**: 201-222.
- Kripke, S.A. 1972. 'Naming and necessity', in D. Davidson and G. Harman (eds) *Semantics of Natural Language*, pp. 253-355. Dordrecht: D. Reidel.
- Locke, Don 1987 'The parfit population problem', *Philosophy* **62**: 131-157.
- McMahan, J. 1981. 'Problems of population theory', *Ethics* **92**: 128-133.

## POSSIBLE PERSONS

- Misner, C.W., K.S. Thorne, et al. (eds) 1973. *Gravitation*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Narveson, Jan. 1967. 'Utilitarianism and future generations', *Mind* **76**: 62-72.
- Narveson, Jan. 1973. 'Moral problems of population', *The Monist* **57**: 62-86.
- Parfit, D. 1976a. 'On doing the best for our children', in M.D. Bayles (ed.) *Ethics and Population*, pp. 100-115. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman.
- Parfit, Derek. 1976b. 'Rights, interests and possible people', in S. Gorovitz (ed.) *Moral Problems in Medicine*, pp. 369-75. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Parfit, Derek 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Passmore, J. 1974. *Man's Responsibility for Nature*. London: Duckworth.
- Prior, A. N. 1960. 'Identifiable Individuals', in *Papers on Time and Tense*, pp. 66-77. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968.
- Routley, Richard and Val Routley 1978. 'Nuclear energy and obligations to the future', *Inquiry* **21**: 133-179. Reprinted in E. Partridge (ed.) *Responsibilities to Future Generations*, pp. 277-301. Buffalo: Prometheus, 1981.
- Sterba, James P. 1980. 'Abortion, distant peoples, and future generations', *Journal of Philosophy* **77**: 424-440.
- Sterba, J. P. 1991. 'The welfare rights of distant peoples and future generations', in J. Sterba (ed.) *Morality in Practice*, 3rd edn, pp. 106-118. Belmont, Ca: Wadsworth.
- Tooley, Michael 1983 *Abortion and Infanticide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wiggins, David and Bernard Williams 1977. 'Introduction', in D. Wiggins and B.A.O. Williams (eds) *Aurel Thomas Kolnai: Ethics Value and Reality*. London: Athlone Press.