The Repugnant (?) Conclusion

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February 18, 2022

The Benign Addition Proof

Huemer presents a version of Parfit's *Mere Addition Paradox*, which derives the Repugnant Conclusion (RC) from the following principles:

> *The Benign Addition Principle:* For any population X, let Y be a population just like it except that everyone is slightly better off and it contains some additional people with lives worth living. Then Y is better than X.

> *Non-anti-Egalitarianism:* If (i) X and Y contain exactly the same people, (ii) Y has higher total (and, hence, average) well-being than X, and (iii) Y is more equal than X, then Y is better than X.

> *Transitivity:* If X is better than Y, and Y is better than Z, then X is better than Z.

Huemer argues we should accept the (repugnant) conclusion. What reasons do we have to *not* accept it?

Distrusting Intuitions

Huemer agrees that RC *seems* repugnant. But a number of factors might be distorting our judgments. Including ...

1. *The Egoistic Bias*. We'd rather exist in A than exist in Z. But that's not the right comparison because it holds fixed that we would exist in either case.

2. *The Large Number Bias.* We have trouble imagining large numbers, so we should expect our intuitions about large populations to be unreliable.

3. *Compounding Small Numbers.* We have trouble grasping how small numbers add up (e.g., how small risk compound to larger risks over a lifetime).

4. *Underrating Low-quality Lives.* It's hard for us to imagine what someone's life in Z would be like, and we can easily mistake it for a life with negative welfare.

If we have independent reasons to distrust our judgment about some matter—e.g., whether the RC is repugnant—then maybe we should revise that judgment?

The Repugnant Conclusion (RC): For any world full of happy people, a world full of people whose lives were just barely worth living would be better, provided that the latter world contained enough people.

Supported by, ...

> *Modal Pareto:* If everyone who would exist in either X or Y rationally prefers X to Y, then X is better than Y.

... increasing total and average utility make things better, and making things more equal can't make things *worse*.

... the Money-pump Argument and by the Composition Argument.

If you, like Parfit, think RC is repugnant, you have to deny one of the principles. But which one?

The Failure of Unrepugnant Accounts

Huemer surveys other ways of avoiding the RC, and argues they
don't succeed:

> (1) *Averagism* entails the Sadistic Conclusion; (2) *Critical Level* views
> entail an even worse version of the Sadistic Conclusion; (3) *Person-
> Affecting* views can't explain why it's wrong to create people who
> spend their lives in agony; (4) *Variable-Value* views either entail the
> Sadistic Conclusion or are anti-Egalitarian; (5) *Perfectionism* is anti-
> Egalitarian (in a sense) and elitist; (6) *Non-Transitive Betterness* is hard to
> accept.

Is he too quick to dismiss some of these other views?

Three Further Arguments for RC

○ **The Actualist Bias.** When assessing the value of a world, we
  weight the interests of the actually existing people more heavily
  than those of potentially existing people. But this is a mistake.

○ **The Equivalence Argument.**

(1) Duration of a benefit is at least equivalent to intensity of benefit.

(2) Number of recipients of a benefit is at least equivalent to dura-
     tion of benefit.

(3) Therefore, for populations with positive utility, population size
     is at least equivalent to average utility (from (1), (2)).

(4) If (3), then the Repugnant Conclusion is true.

(5) Therefore, the Repugnant Conclusion is true.

○ **The More-Is-Better Argument**.

(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), the Repugnant Conclusion is true.

(4) Therefore, the Repugnant Conclusion is true.