***Morally, we should prefer to exist: a response to Smilansky***

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In an ingenious article recently published in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy,* Saul Smilansky argues for the surprising conclusion that our own existence is regrettable. He argues that without the calamities of history, such as the holocaust, we would never have come into existence. Because we regret that these calamities have occurred, we also have to regret everything that is implied by them, including our own existence. Smilansky uses the holocaust as the calamity of choice to advance his argument, but really any negative event of a large enough scale and significance would do. Smilansky's argument can be glossed as follows:

1. If the holocaust had not occurred, I would not have existed.
2. It is regrettable that the holocaust occurred.
3. **Smilansky’s Closure Principle.** If it is regrettable that the holocaust occurred, and if the holocaust had not occurred I would not have existed, then my own existence is regrettable.
4. Therefore, my own existence is regrettable.

The argument is formally valid, so if there is a problem with the argument it must be with one of the premises. But Smilansky presents compelling arguments for all three of the premises in the argument.

With respect to his first premise, he argues that ‘in accordance with the way the world works it was not possible for us to exist without the large set of historical (or indeed natural) tragedies that preceded us. Without those tragedies… [t]he causal conditions realistically required for our existence would have been prevented’ (Smilansky, 2013, p. 656). Smilansky realises that it is logically possible for the holocaust not to occur and us to exist, but claims, plausibly, that non-holocaust worlds in which we do exist are far more remote than non-holocaust worlds in which we don't exist.

With respect to his second premise, Smilansky appeals to intuition. For example, on page 660 he says ‘[t]here is a fair amount of moral leeway concerning what one may be sorry … about … [y]et when we talk about evil of such magnitude and malevolence as the Holocaust, surely such leeway vanishes’ (Smilansky, 2013). Moreover, later on page 663, after noting the causal connection between the holocaust and our present existence, Smilansky suggests that ‘[t]he idea that we would not prefer the non-occurrence of horrors such as slavery or the Holocaust, simply because our own (multi-person) existence depends on these appalling events, seems to me hideous. We ought to bite this bullet, and regret the history of the world that includes our existence’ (Smilansky, 2013).

With respect to the third premise, the closure principle, Smilansky notes that regret, in his sense, takes an entire state of affairs as its object. As a consequence, Smilansky believes that if we regret one thing then we really have to regret everything that is implied by what we regret. He says explicitly that ‘[g]iven that we could not realistically expect to exist without the calamities of history like the Holocaust, we cannot merely say that we prefer the Holocaust not to have existed…without being willing to acknowledge that this implies that we would not have come to exist ... [if one regrets the holocaust, one also] regrets one’s existence in this sense’ (Smilansky, 2013, p. 657). Despite the appeal to this line of reasoning, it is fallacious. The Smilansky’s closure principle, I maintain, is false. It is the aim of the present note to explain why.

Smilansky's argument relies heavily on the following further principle about regret:

**Smilansky’s Regret Principle (SRP).** It is regrettable that a state of affairs is the case only if one judges ‘it to be preferable overall that [the] state of affairs *had not* existed’ (Smilansky, 2013, p. 656, my emphasis).

SRP gives a necessary condition for a state of affairs to be regrettable. Without SRP the closure principle is undermotivated. Because SRP is expressed in the subjunctive mood, it entails SRP′, on a commonly accepted analysis of counterfactuals (see Lewis, for example, 1973).

**SRP′.** The state of affairs *S* is regrettable only if:

1. The closest worlds in which ~ *S* is the case are preferable to the closest worlds in which *S* is the case.
2. *S* is the case at @.

In order to see why the closure principle is false, it is sufficient to create a model where the antecedent of the third premise is true and the consequent is false. I will therefore need to model three things: a state of affairs where (A) the holocaust is regrettable, (B) if the holocaust had not occurred then I would not have existed, and (C) my own existence, contrary to Smilansky’s contention, is *not* regrettable. In order to do this, consider the set of ordered worlds below, ranked first in terms of similarity and then in terms of preferability. It is assumed that similarity and preferability are different kinds of comparisons and so can lead to different orderings of worlds.

Let *H* = the holocaust occurred

Let *E* = I exist

**Similarity Ranking**

**Least Similar**

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**Most Similar**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Worlds | States-of-Affairs |
|  | W3 | ~H, E |
|  | W2 | ~H, ~E |
|  | W1 | H, ~E |
|  | @ | H, E |

**Preferability Ranking**

**Worst**

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**Best**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Worlds | States-of-Affairs |
|  | W1 | H, ~E |
|  | @ | H, E |
|  | W2 | ~H, ~E |
|  | W3 | ~H, E |

So long as this model represents a genuine possibility, it is a counter-example to the closure principle. Let me explain why.

1. **The holocaust is regrettable**

Using SRP′ above, for us to regret the holocaust it must meet the following two conditions:

1. The closest worlds in which ~*H* is the case are preferable to the closest worlds in which *H* is the case.
2. *H* is the case at @.

These two conditions are met in this set of worlds because the closest world in which ~ *H* (w2) is indeed preferable to the closest world in which h is the case (@). Additionally, h is obviously the case at @.

1. **If the holocaust had not occurred then I would not have existed**

Additionally, in order for (B) to be true, the following must be true:

There is a closer (similarity) world to @ in which ~ *H* and ~*E*, than any world in which ~ *H* and *E*.

If we look at the similarity table we can see that the ~ *H* and ~*E* world (w2) is indeed closer than the ~ *H* and *E* world (w3) and so in the set of worlds I have laid out I would not have existed if the holocaust had not occurred.

1. **My own existence is *not* regrettable.**

For me to regret my own existence, the following must be the case:

1. The closest worlds in which ~*E* is the case are preferable to the closest worlds in which *E* is the case.
2. *E* is the case at @.

*E* is the case at @, so that condition is met. But, the closest world in which ~ *E* is the case (w1) is not actually preferable to the closest world where E is the case (@). Therefore in this set of worlds we should not regret our own existence.

The model I have outlined above presents a clear counterexample to the closure principle articulated in Smilansky’s third premise. It represents a set of possible worlds where the holocaust is regrettable, the non-occurrence of the holocaust implies our own non-existence, and yet our own existence is not regrettable. Smilansky presented an interesting argument for a novel conclusion, but his argument relies on a false premise. His argument, thankfully, does not require us to regret our own existence.