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Derek Parfit

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DEREK PARFIT

Acts and Outcomes: A Reply to Boonin-Vail

Suppose that some country, or the world, could be in either of two states. In state A, there would be a large population, who would all have a high quality of life. In B, there would be twice as many people, and these people would all be worse off than everyone would be in A. Most of us, I claimed, would believe that

(1) B would be worse than A.

But there is a problem raised by another possible state of the world, which I called A+. This state differs from A merely by containing an extra group of people, whose lives would be well worth living, though they would be worse off than everyone would be in A. Most of us, I claimed, would believe that

(2) A+ would not be worse than A.

Given certain further assumptions, we would believe that

(3) B would be better than A+.

These three beliefs are all, I claimed, plausible; but they cannot all be true. B cannot be worse than A if it is better than something which is not worse than A. I also claimed that, of these beliefs, the hardest to deny are (2) and (3). So we seem forced to abandon (1). We seem forced to conclude that, compared with the existence of a large population whose lives were well worth living, it would be better if there were twice as many people, who would all be worse off. Since that is hard to believe, I called this the *Mere Addition Paradox*.¹

1. Originally presented in my "Future Generations: Further Problems," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1982). I presented a longer version in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984); but this was flawed. (I should not have claimed, for example, that the badness of the inequality in A+ could depend on how it came about.)

In his excellent article, David Boonin-Vail describes a corresponding *Oughtness Paradox*. According to him, most of us would believe that

(4) choosing to produce B would be morally worse than choosing to produce A;

but we would also believe that

(5) choosing to produce A+ would not be worse than choosing to produce A,

and that

(6) choosing to produce B would be better than choosing to produce A+.

These three beliefs also seem to be inconsistent. And, since it seems hardest to deny (5) and (6), we seem forced to abandon (4).

This paradox, Boonin-Vail argues, can be solved. When we give a more accurate description of these beliefs, we can show them not to be inconsistent. By solving this paradox, Boonin-Vail then claims, we can deprive the Mere Addition Paradox of its moral force.²

If Boonin-Vail is right in his description of our beliefs, his paradox can, I agree, be solved. But mine, I shall claim, retains its force.

I

Boonin-Vail's solution has two elements. One is a claim about our moral intuitions. What we would find plausible, he suggests, is not (5) but

(7) choosing to produce A+ would not be worse than choosing to produce A, *if these were the only possible outcomes*.

Boonin-Vail then defends

The Deontic Claim: Whether one choice is morally better than another may depend upon which other choices are possible.

If this claim is true, (7) is compatible with (4) and (6). We could consistently believe that, though it would not be worse to choose A+ rather than A if these were the only possible outcomes, this choice *would be*

2. Pages 280 and 307 above. Boonin-Vail discusses, not (5), but the claim that choosing to produce A+ would be better than choosing to produce A. I have ignored this complication, since it does not affect what I have to say.

worse if B were also possible. We could then believe that, if all three outcomes were possible, B would be a better choice than A+, but a worse choice than A. And we could continue believe that, whether or not A+ were possible, B would be a worse choice than A.

Of the people who would find (5) plausible, some, I agree, might be confusing (5) with (7). When these claims were distinguished, it might be only (7) that these people were inclined to believe. I shall not try to guess how many of us would, in this way, switch from (5) to (7). Nor shall I discuss whether that would be a defensible move. Neither question, I believe, is of much importance.

To defend the Deontic Claim, Boonin-Vail appeals to a complicated principle about how we should choose between possible future populations. That is unnecessary. When I defended this claim, I appealed to a simpler and less controversial example.³ Suppose first that we have two alternatives:

X: saving a stranger from losing an arm, at some great though lesser cost to ourselves,

Y: doing nothing.

If these were the only possibilities, choosing X would be morally better than choosing Y. But we can plausibly believe that, though choosing X would be admirable, we would not be morally required to bear this great cost, and could permissibly choose Y. Suppose instead that we had a third alternative:

Z: at the same cost to ourselves, saving both this stranger's arms.

We can plausibly believe that, if Z were also possible, it would be wrong for us to choose X. That choice might still be saintly, or heroic, but it would also be perverse. If we are prepared to bear the great cost to ourselves, it would be wrong to choose to save only one of the stranger's arms. We would then be failing to save his other arm, when we could easily do so at no extra cost. But it would still be permissible to choose Y. Since acting wrongly is worse than acting permissibly, choosing X would here be worse than choosing Y. So, as the Deontic Claim implies, whether choosing X would be worse than choosing Y depends upon which other choices would be possible.

3. In my "Future Generations: Further Problems," sec. III.

If we were Act Consequentialists, we would have a different view about this example. We would believe that, if only X and Y were possible, it would be worse and therefore wrong to choose Y, and that, if Z were also possible, though it would then be wrong to choose either X or Y, choosing Y would still be worse than choosing X. On this view, the relative merits of these two choices do not depend on whether Z is also possible. But, even if we reject the Deontic Claim if put forward as a substantive view, we cannot plausibly regard this claim as incoherent.

I suggested another example, which is closer to the paradoxes that we are considering. Suppose that some woman has only these alternatives:

P: having a handicapped child,

Q: having no child.

If this child's handicap would not be severe, and we make certain other assumptions, we can plausibly believe that it would be permissible for this woman to choose either *P* or *Q*, and that neither choice would be worse than the other. Suppose instead that this woman had a third alternative:

R: having this same child, but in a way that would ensure that he would not be handicapped.

We can plausibly believe that, if *R* were also possible, it would be wrong for this woman to choose *P* rather than *R*. Choosing *Q*, however, would still be permissible. Since acting wrongly is worse than acting permissibly, choosing *P* would here be worse than choosing *Q*. We can thus believe that, as the Deontic Claim implies, whether choosing *P* would be worse than choosing *Q* depends upon which other choices would be possible.

As this second example shows, the Deontic Claim need not appeal to the permissibility of declining to bear great costs to make the outcome better. That need not be why, in both versions of this case, we believe choosing *Q* to be permissible, and to be no worse than choosing to have a child. That belief can be defended in a different way. We could claim that, if this woman chooses to have no child, there would be no child whom she has thereby failed to benefit. In contrast, if she chooses to have a child, she ought to ensure, if she can, that this child avoids the harm of being handicapped. That is why she ought not to choose *P* rather than *R*. As before, there are ways in which this view might be challenged. But it cannot be claimed to be incoherent. And, if the rela-

tive goodness of two choices can be coherently claimed to depend upon which other choices would be possible, that is enough to undermine Boonin-Vail's Oughtness Paradox.⁴

II

If the Oughtness Paradox is in this way solved, does that deprive the Mere Addition Paradox of its moral force?

I believe not. All we have shown is that, even if we believe both (6) and (7), we can coherently believe that

(4) choosing to produce B would be morally worse than choosing to produce A.

That does not yet show that (4) is either true, or defensible. Only by defending (4) could we deprive the Mere Addition Paradox of its force.

Boonin-Vail considers several ways of defending (4). The most straightforward would be to appeal to

(1) B, as an outcome, would be worse than A.

As I wrote, that is what most of us assume. Compared with the existence of some large population, it would be worse, we assume, if there were twice as many people, who would all be worse off. But, as Boonin-Vail says, this way of defending (4) cannot deprive my paradox of its force. If my argument were sound, we could not appeal to (1), since this argument would show that B could not be worse than A.

Boonin-Vail next suggests that we are entitled to believe (4) because we have not yet been given a reason to disbelieve this claim. That, by itself, is not enough. We are not entitled to believe whatever we have not

4. As I have said, Boonin-Vail presents his solution in a different and possibly misleading way. Instead of directly defending what I have called the Deontic Claim, Boonin-Vail treats this claim as one implication of his *Population Choice Principle*, which he uses to reject what he calls the *Oughtness Transitivity Axiom*. He assumes that, in rejecting this axiom, he is denying the transitivity of the relation *is a better choice than*. Since that denial may seem implausible, Boonin-Vail then claims that his view is less extreme than Temkin's suggestion that *all things considered better* may not be transitive (pp. 293–96 above).

Transitivity is not, I believe, the issue here. If the Deontic Claim were false, the Oughtness Transitivity Axiom would be true. If the Deontic Claim is true, as Boonin-Vail and I believe, we must distinguish two relations: *better than*, and *is a better choice than, relative to a certain set of possible alternatives*. These relations, as Boonin-Vail notes, are both transitive. We should reject the Oughtness Transitivity Axiom, not because some morally important relation is not transitive, but because this axiom fails to distinguish these two transitive relations.

been given reasons not to believe. Thus we are not entitled to believe that, when Queen Victoria was crowned, the number of hairs on her head was even. To be entitled to believe (4), we must at least have some reason to do so.

Though we must have reasons for our moral beliefs, these reasons need not always appeal to other beliefs, or principles. Thus we are entitled to believe that suffering is bad, even if our reason for having that belief is, and is only, that it seems so clearly to be true. If we cannot appeal to (1), could we defend (4) in such a way? Could we say that, even if we became convinced that B would not be worse than A, it would still seem clearly worse to choose to produce B? We must, I believe, say more than that. If this outcome would not be worse, we must suggest why it would be worse to bring it about.

Narveson made one suggestion, to which Boonin-Vail appeals. This suggestion is best introduced as a way of defending (1). Of those who believe that B might not be worse than A, some claim that, in one respect, B would be better than A. According to them,

(8) it would be better if there were more happiness.

On my assumptions, even though each of the people in B would be less happy than everyone in A, they together would have more happiness. So, to defend our view that B would be worse than A, we must either reject (8), or claim that, though B would be in one way better than A, it would be worse on balance, or all things considered.

Narveson suggested an attractive way of rejecting (8). In most cases, Narveson admitted, (8) is true. But, by taking an impersonal form, this claim wrongly assumes what we might call the *Milk Production Model*. (8) treats people as the mere containers of an impersonal value. Narveson appealed instead to

The Person-affecting Restriction: This part of morality—the part concerned with human well-being—should be entirely explained in terms of what would be good or bad for those people whom our acts affect.

On this person-affecting view, it is good to increase happiness only when, and only because, we are thereby making people happier. Narveson then claimed that, by adding happy people to the world, we do not make these people happier, or in any other way benefit them.⁵

5. Jan Narveson, "Utilitarianism and New Generations," *Mind*, 76 (January 1967), and "Moral Problems of Population," *The Monist* 57, no. 1 (January 1973).

Since that last claim can be challenged, I suggested another way to defend Narveson's reply. Even if we could benefit people by causing them to exist, our failure to cause them to exist would not be worse for these people, since there would not even be the people for whom this could be worse. If we can defensibly appeal to the Person-affecting Restriction, we can claim that, even though B would contain more happiness than A, that would not make B in any way better than A. If we chose to bring about A, that would be worse for no one.

Unfortunately, as I argued, we must abandon the Person-affecting Restriction. It comes to grief on the *Non-Identity Problem*, or the fact that many of our choices will affect who the people are who will later live. Thus it might be true that, if we chose a policy of depleting certain resources, our choice would greatly lower the quality of life in the further future, but be worse for no one. We cannot claim that, in such cases, we would not have any moral reason to avoid making choices that would have such effects.⁶

There are other ways of trying to defend the view that, as (1) claims, B would be worse than A. Since I am strongly drawn to this view, I hope that such a defense can succeed. But this defense would have to answer various counter-arguments, of which the Mere Addition Paradox is one.⁷

Boonin-Vail argues that, even without solving that paradox, and thus defending (1), we can defend (4). In other words, we can claim

(9) Even if B itself would not be worse than A, choosing to produce B would be worse than choosing to produce A.

As before, we need to have some reason for believing (9). Nor can our reason simply be that (9) seems to be clearly true. (9) is not like the claim that suffering is bad, or that it is wrong to torture others for our own amusement.

Boonin-Vail suggests that, to defend (9), we can appeal to Narveson's view. In his words, "to the extent that moral actions are better for their producing more happiness, they are better when they produce more

6. See my *Reasons and Persons*, secs. 199–25, and 132–36. This argument discusses various other kinds of case, and moral principle, which need not be mentioned here.

7. Another argument would appeal to the claim that, in the case of suffering, it is clear that mere quantity always matters, and to the paradoxical conclusions that this claim would imply if we reject the analogous claim about happiness. (I gave such an argument, though with unnecessary complications, in Chapter 18 of *Reasons and Persons*.)

happiness for people rather than when they produce more people for happiness." Narveson's idea, he says "*was* a good reason for thinking that A is a better state of affairs than B, and it remains a good reason." If we have to give up the view that A is better than B, that, Boonin-Vail claims, was for other reasons. So we can still appeal to Narveson's idea in defending (9).⁸

The Person-affecting Restriction was, I agree, a good idea. But, as I argued, it fails. Nor does it fail only when applied to judgments about the goodness of outcomes. It fails just as clearly when applied to the rightness of acts. If our policy of depletion would greatly lower the quality of life in the further future, that gives us a reason to believe that we ought not to adopt this policy; and we have that reason even if we can predict that, because of the Non-Identity Problem, this policy would be worse for no one.

Boonin-Vail then suggests a second way of defending (9). If we have not yet solved my Mere Addition Paradox, we cannot be confident that B would be worse than A, since my argument may show that this cannot be true. But my argument cannot show that B is *better* than A. As Boonin-Vail notes, I explicitly deny that my argument shows that. So, even with my paradox unsolved, we can be sure, Boonin-Vail claims, that A is at least as good as B. And, since my paradox might be solved, A might be better than B. Since A would be at least as good as B, and might be better, we "can confidently conclude that choosing A is morally better than choosing B."⁹

This defense, I believe, also fails. Though I denied that my original argument could show B to be worse than A, I suggested other versions that support similar conclusions. The Mere Addition Paradox is one of a set of related arguments: one that I discussed at length only because it is the simplest, and presents some of the issues in their clearest form.

Another such argument was the *Second Paradox*.¹⁰ That differed from the Mere Addition Paradox in two ways. First, all of the relevant outcomes involved inequality. That feature we can ignore here. Second, this paradox does not involve mere addition. In the larger of two possible

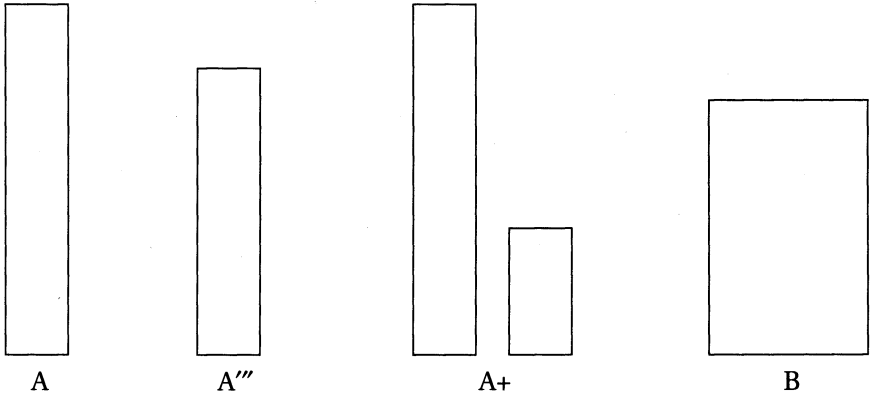
8. Page 288 above.

9. Page 289 above.

10. Presented in the second half of the article that Boonin-Vail cites, "Overpopulation and the Quality of Life," in *Applied Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). This revises the argument I gave in *Reasons and Persons*, sec. 148.

populations, there would be a group the size of the smaller population, who would all be *better off*.

Boonin-Vail himself considers such a case:



When transferred to this case, my argument would be this. Suppose that the actual state of affairs was A+. It would be hard to deny, I claimed, that

(10) A'' would have been worse than A+.

We might know that, if what had come about had been A'', many people with lives worth living would never have existed, and *everyone who did exist would have been worse off*. How could that *not* have been worse?¹¹

In this version of my argument, since B is better than A+, which is better than A'', B must be better than A''. But, as Boonin-Vail points out,

11. In this version of the case, we assume that the better off people in A+ would themselves have existed in A'', and would all have been worse off. It can be objected that, in appealing to this assumption, I am giving weight to the *person-affecting* considerations that I elsewhere claim that we ought to ignore. (This objection is made by Robert Adams's "Should Ethics Be More Impersonal?," *The Philosophical Review* (October 1989); and by Larry Temkin's "Rethinking the Good," in *Reading Parfit*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, forthcoming.) My argument, I agree, cannot essentially rely on such person-affecting considerations. But I can fairly appeal to the claim that, in this version of the case, it is exceptionally difficult to deny that, compared with A+, A'' would have been worse. When Boonin-Vail discusses this example (page 300–301 above), he reaches similar conclusions.

B stands to A''' in much the way in which B stands to A. Compared with A'', B contains twice as many people, who would all be worse off. These people would not be worse off by the same margin; but, for our purposes, that is irrelevant. This version of my argument, if sound, would show that a state like A would be worse than B. That undermines Boonin-Vail's claim that, even without answering my argument, we can be sure that A would be at least as good as B. So we cannot claim that, since A would be at least as good as B, and might be better, producing A must be better than producing B.

As these remarks show, to deprive the Mere Addition Paradox of its force, we must defend, not (4) or (9), but

(11) Even if B would be better than A, choosing to produce B would be worse than choosing to produce A.

If we are not Act Consequentialists, we believe that such a claim might be true. On our view, it is sometimes morally worse to do what would make the outcome better. That might be worse, for example, if our act would violate some deontological constraint. But no such claim applies to our choice between A and B. There is no deontological constraint against having more than two children. And, if it were true that, by all having four children, we would make the outcome better, it is hard to see why having those children would be wrong.

Much of Boonin-Vail's paper is concerned with what he calls the *Population Choice Principle*. Boonin-Vail suggests that, to solve his Oughtness Paradox, we need to defend this principle. As I have argued, that is not so. It is enough to appeal to the Deontic Claim, which can be defended in more straightforward ways. Boonin-Vail also argues that, by appealing to his principle, we can defend certain claims that he finds plausible. But these claims do not include (11). Indeed, as Boonin-Vail notes, his appeal to his principle must assume (11).

Apart from his appeal to the Person-affecting Restriction, which I have argued that we must abandon, Boonin-Vail says nothing to support (11). But only (11) would deprive my paradox of its moral force. So, as far as I can see, there is still work to be done.