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ADDING HAPPY PEOPLE

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Almost every week there's a headline about our planet's population explosion. For instance Indian officials confirmed recently[1] that India is projected to overtake China in just over a decade to become the most populous country on Earth. Many are worried that the planet is becoming increasingly overpopulated. Whether it is overpopulated, underpopulated, or appropriately populated is a challenging ethical question.

Let's suppose a 'happy life' is one that would be on balance well worth living from the point of view of the person living it. Is it *good* to add people with happy lives to the world? This question divides into two more specific ones. First, is it good to add happy people, in virtue of the good effects of doing so for us already existing people? Second, is it good to add happy people, independently of any effects on the already existing? The latter question is by far the more intriguing.

The Canadian philosopher Jan Narveson famously answered this question in the negative, saying: 'We are in favour of *making people happy*, but neutral about *making happy people*.'[2] Whether this stance is correct has a wide range of practical implications for procreation, resource conservation, climate change, and existential risks (such as the danger of a large asteroid colliding with the planet). Some of the implications are profound: since there are *very* many happy future people who could exist, if morality were in favour of making happy people we'd have an overwhelmingly strong reason to pursue the colonization of other planets by our descendants; we'd have very little, if any, reason to do this if Narveson were right.

But I think Narveson is wrong. In addition to being about making people happy, morality *is* about making happy people. By adding happy

people we *in one way* make the world a better place and we have significant reason to do so. This significant reason would entail that we *should* add happy people, if there were absolutely no downside to doing so. Of course, it may be that adding many happy people to the current population of Earth would have serious environmental and social downsides, and be a bad thing *all things considered*.

Instead, suppose I could push a button that would create billions of happy people living on several large and lush Eden-like planets. These people would in turn produce further generations of happy people, who would do likewise, and so on for the foreseeable future. Pushing the button would cost me nothing and do no harm or wrong. Would it be wrong of me *not* to push the button, in this case? Yes, I believe it would.

There are several arguments that philosophers have offered in favour of adding happy people. I'll sketch just two.

The most fascinating argument is based on a kind of scepticism about the moral significance of the boundaries between persons, according to which persons are, at most, mere containers of what really matters: *happiness*. On this view, it doesn't matter in and of itself where a fixed amount of happiness is placed. Whether we put it in this or that container, or build a new container to put it in, is in itself irrelevant. Thus, on this view, making people happy and making happy people are equally morally important, other things being equal.

There are different routes to such scepticism about the moral significance of the boundaries between persons. One is purely metaphysical: there simply *are* no separate persons; there are only sets of experiences. There's a set of experiences here where this chapter is being written, and another set over there, and there, where it's being read. But there are no entities above and beyond these experiences, who *have* them. This sort of view is advocated by Buddhists as well as the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume. Another route is only 'metaphysically inspired', and is consistent with the belief that there really are separate persons. The idea here is that when we study certain challenging cases within the literature on the metaphysics of persons and personal identity,[3] it appears very difficult to maintain the moral significance of these notions, either in general or within particular parts of morality. One such case is that of personal *fission*: it is stipulated that a person would survive if she lost either of her cerebral hemispheres, but

what in fact happens is her two hemispheres come apart and each is successfully transplanted into its own 'fresh' body. A powerful argument has been made that this reveals that identity is not what really matters—the two resulting persons are clearly not identical with each other and it seems arbitrary to claim that one of them is identical to the original person.[4]

But the most fascinating sort of argument in favour of adding happy people isn't, in my estimation, the most compelling one. Suppose we grant that it matters whether some amount of happiness is located in the life of an already existing person rather than that of a merely possible person. Still, a simple and plausible thought is that adding happiness is good to some extent, wherever it's placed. It seems even harder to resist when viewed in light of the analogous thought about suffering: that adding suffering is bad to some extent, wherever it's placed. Surely it would be bad to bring into the world a life of relentless and insufferable pain. Several philosophers have attempted to defend the following asymmetry: while it's bad to add suffering by adding miserable people, it's *not* good to add happiness by adding happy people. In my view, none of these attempts succeeds.[5]

Largely because I think the asymmetry can't be defended adequately, I also think the world would, in one way, be made better by the addition of happy people to it. I believe we have reason to colonize a variety of planets throughout the galaxy, bringing about trillions of happy lives. Indeed, I believe we have *a lot* of reason to pursue this; about as much reason as we'd have to prevent trillions of miserable lives from coming into existence.

Notes

1. <http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2015-05-05/news/61833343_1_population-growth-decadal-growth-rate-family-planning>
2. *The Monist* (1973). 'Moral problems of population' 57/1: 62–86; quote on p. 80.
3. Noonan, H. (2003). *Personal Identity*, second edition (London: Routledge).
4. Derek Parfit is among the first to explore the metaphysically inspired route, using cases like this one. See Part Three of (1984). *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). A natural response is that fission cases reveal psychological or physical continuity to be what matters (rather than identity). Jacob Ross impressively challenges this move in his (2014). 'Divided we fall:

fission and the failure of self-interest', *Philosophical Perspectives* 28/1: 222–62. For a puzzle about fission and desert, see my (2014). 'Does division multiply desert?' *Philosophical Review* 123/1: 43–77.

5. For example, Roberts, Melinda (December 2011). 'The asymmetry: a solution', *Theoria* 77/4: 333–67.