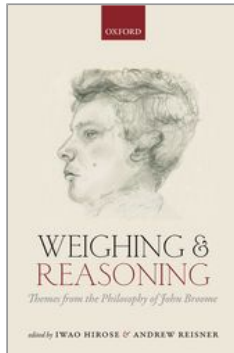


The Affirmative Answer to the Existential Question and the Person Affecting Restriction

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Abstract and Keywords

The person affecting restriction states that one outcome can only be better than another if it is better for someone. The existential question concerns whether existence can be better or worse for a person than non-existence, the personal value of existence. According to the affirmative answer, existence can be better or worse than non-existence for a person. This chapter discusses the implications of the restriction and the affirmative answer to the existential question for population ethics, the value of future generations, and especially for the possibility of avoiding the so-called repugnant conclusion, an undesirable implication of classical utilitarianism.

Keywords: person affecting restriction, value of existence, population ethics, future generations, repugnant conclusion, utilitarianism

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I Introduction

The person affecting restriction, put as a slogan, states that an outcome can only be better than another if it is better for someone (and, since ‘worse’ is just the converse of ‘better’, an outcome can only be worse than another if it is worse for someone).^{1,2} The existential question concerns whether existence can be better or worse than non-existence for a person. According to the affirmative answer to this question, existence can indeed be better or worse than non-existence for a person. In this chapter, I shall discuss the implications of the restriction and the affirmative answer to the existential question for population ethics.³ Hence, the chapter is an investigation into what one could call ‘analytical existentialism’.⁴

(p.111) II The Person Affecting Restriction

The person affecting restriction has a strong intuitive appeal and it has been suggested that it is presupposed in many arguments in moral philosophy, political theory, and welfare economics.⁵ Moreover, several theorists have suggested that the counterintuitive implications in population ethics of so-called ‘impersonal’ welfarist theories arise because such theories violate this restriction. This applies in particular to Derek Parfit’s well-known repugnant conclusion, which is entailed by classical utilitarianism.⁶

One can of course interpret the restriction in many ways and some interpretations are actually sufficiently weak to make them perfectly compatible with impersonal welfarist theories such as classical utilitarianism.⁷ However, here I am interested in a strong reading of the restriction, which is also the most widely discussed one and the one that is thought to help us with the counterintuitive results of impersonal welfarist theories. This version stresses the individualist aspect of value by claiming that axiology is essentially *person comparative*:

The person affecting restriction. If an outcome *A* is better (worse) than *B*, then *A* is better (worse) than *B* for at least one individual in *A* or in *B*.

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In cases involving only the same people in the compared outcomes, this restriction is quite straightforward and, I surmise, widely accepted by theorists with welfarist inclinations.⁸ In comparisons between outcomes involving different people, however, and in particular in cases involving people whose existence is contingent on our choices, the restriction becomes ambiguous. An outcome *A* is better than *B* for John if he has a higher welfare in *A* as compared to *B*. We can assume that much. But what if John exists in outcome *A* but not in outcome *B*? Is *A* then better or worse than *B* for John? In other words, what is the correct answer to the existential question? Depending on the answer to this question, the restriction has very different implications regarding how to morally evaluate different possible futures.

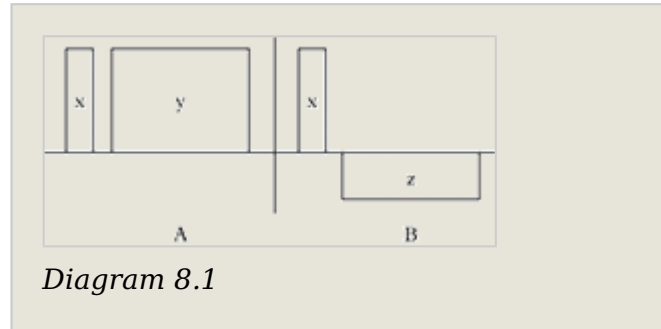
(p.112) The most popular answer to the existential question is probably the negative one: Existence cannot be better or worse than non-existence for a person. Thus, for example, Derek Parfit (1984), John Broome (1999), Krister Bykvist (2007a), and others have worried that if we take a person's life to be better for her than non-existence, then we would have to conclude that it would have been worse for her if she did not exist, which is clearly absurd: nothing would have been worse or better for a person if she had not existed. This argument is eloquently stated by Broome:

it cannot ever be *true* that it is better for a person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all. If it were better for a person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all, then if she had never lived at all, that would have been worse for her than if she had lived. But if she had never lived at all, there would have been no her for it to be worse for, so it could not have been worse for her.⁹

The negative answer to the existential question is bad news for the restriction since it will then have clearly unacceptable implications.¹⁰ For example, consider the 'future bliss or hell case' shown in Diagram 8.1.

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The width of each block in the diagram represents the number of people in the population, and the height represents



their lifetime welfare. This welfare is positive (or, as we could also put it, people have lives worth living) when the block is above the horizontal line, and negative when the block is below the line.¹¹ Assume that we can (p.113) either see to it that all the people in the future have excellent lives (the *y*-people in outcome *A*) or that they have hellish lives (the *z*-people in outcome *B*). Assume further that these two possible future populations are of the same size but consist of different people, and that these two outcomes are equally good for us, the currently existing *x*-people.

Since the *y*- and *z*-people do not exist in both outcomes, the negative answer to the existential question implies that outcome *A* is neither better nor worse for the *y*- and *z*-people as compared to *B*. Moreover, the two outcomes are equally good for the *x*-people. Hence, according to the person affecting restriction, *A* cannot be better than *B* since it is not better for any individual (nor is of course *B* better than *A*). In other words, if combined with the negative answer to the existential question, the person affecting restriction implies that these outcomes are either equally good or incomparable in value. But that is clearly the wrong diagnosis of the future bliss or hell case. Rather, outcome *A* is clearly better than outcome *B*. So with the negative answer to the existential question, the person affecting restriction has to go.

Nils Holtug (1996, 2001), Melinda Roberts (1998, 2003), Matthew Adler (2009), and Rabinowicz and I (2010, forthcoming(a)) have defended an affirmative answer to the existential question. We shall not enter this intriguing and not yet resolved debate here, but we shall assume that any

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reasonable defence of the affirmative answer to the existential question avoids the absurd conclusion that worries Broome and others. Hence, even if a person's life is better or worse for her than non-existence, it does not follow that it would have been worse or better for her if she did not exist.¹²

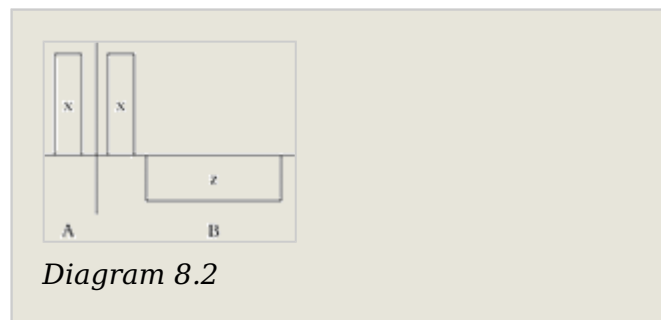
Given this affirmative answer to the existential question, one might hope that one can retain the person affecting restriction as the link between 'better' and 'better for'. It does seem plausible to claim that, to the extent we only focus on welfare, an outcome cannot be better than another outcome without being better for someone. While the restriction yields very counterintuitive implications when combined with the negative answer to the existential question, might it avoid such implications given an affirmative answer? And can it help us with the counterintuitive implications of impersonal welfarist theories? To which I shall now turn.

(p.114) III The Restriction and the Affirmative Answer

Firstly, it should be noted that coupled with the affirmative answer, the restriction, as it is usually stated (and as I have stated it above), does yield counterintuitive implications. Consider for instance the case set out in Diagram 8.2.

Assume that we can either see to it that all the people in the future have excellent lives (the x-people enjoying very

high positive welfare in outcome A) or that some of them have excellent lives (the x-people in outcome B) but most of them they have hellish lives (the z-people in outcome B), that is, very negative welfare. Clearly, outcome A is superior to outcome B.



However, suppose that outcome A is the one that actually obtains. The person affecting restriction implies, counter-

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intuitively, that *A* is not better than *B*, since—as things actually are—there exists no one for whom *A* is better than *B*. The added *z*-people in the hypothetical outcome *B*, for whom *A* would have been better, do not actually exist. Intuitively, however, if *A* would have been better than *B* had *B* obtained (and *B* is not better than *A* if *A* obtains, as in our case), then *A* is better than *B* irrespective of whether *A* or *B* obtains.¹³

The reason for this failure of the restriction is that the betterness relation between outcomes does not require the actual existence of the affected persons. Persons enter as *relata* in the triadic ‘better for’-relation and therefore must exist for that relation to obtain, but they are not *relata* in the dyadic betterness relation that obtains between outcomes. This contrast between the triadic and the dyadic relations of betterness explains why the person affecting restriction cannot be correct as it stands.

To solve problems like this, Holtug has suggested that we should weaken the restriction by adding a disjunctive element.¹⁴ We shall formulate this weaker version as follows:

The subjunctive person affecting restriction. If an outcome *A* is better than *B*, then *A* would be better than *B* for someone that would exist if either *A* or *B* were to obtain.

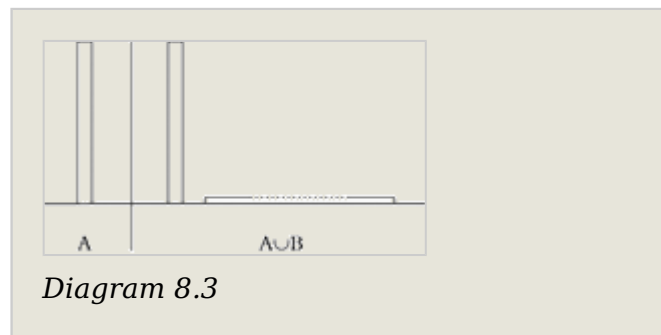
(p.115) In the case discussed above, the second disjunct of this weaker restriction is applicable since, if *B* were to obtain, then *A* would be better than *B* for the *z*-people. Hence, *A* can be better than *B* according to this restriction.

Clearly, it is this disjunctive version of the restriction that we should consider given the affirmative answer to the existential question. One might worry, however, that this restriction does not have much bite. If one compares two outcomes *A* and *B*, then this restriction will not exclude any rankings of *A* and *B* as soon as *A* contains some persons with positive welfare that do not exist in *B*, and *B* contains some persons with positive welfare that don't exist in *A*.¹⁵

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The appearances are misleading, however. The subjunctive restriction does have considerable force, irrespectively of whether it is coupled with a positive or negative answer to the existential question. For example, it rules out all welfarist theories which imply that a mere addition of lives with positive welfare can make a population worse. Prominent examples of such theories are average and critical-level utilitarianism.¹⁶ To see this, consider the case presented in Diagram 8.3 (dashes indicates that the block in question should be much wider than shown, that is, the population size is much larger than shown).

According to average utilitarianism, $A \cup B$ is worse than A since the average welfare is lower in $A \cup B$ as compared to A .



According to critical-level utilitarianism, the contributive value of a person's life is her welfare minus a positive critical level and the value of a population is calculated by summing these differences for all individuals in the population. Assuming that the B -people are below the critical level, critical-level utilitarianism reaches the same verdict as average utilitarianism. The addition of B -people has a negative contributive value given that their welfare is below the critical level.

However, $A \cup B$ would not be worse than A for anyone, irrespectively of whether A or $A \cup B$ were to obtain. Consequently, the subjunctive person affecting restriction implies that $A \cup B$ cannot be worse than A and thus rules out theories such as average and critical-level utilitarianism.

(p.116) So the subjunctive restriction has considerable force. Nevertheless, although close at hand given the subjunctive restriction and the affirmative answer to the existential

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question, we are not yet forced to say that $A \cup B$ is better than A (or equally as good as A). The subjunctive restriction is compatible with theories that declare these outcomes incommensurable, that is, $A \cup B$ is neither at least as good as A , nor worse than A . One example is a version of critical-level utilitarianism suggested by Blackorby et al. Instead of using one critical level, they propose an interval of critical levels when comparing populations of different size. The interval of critical levels is assumed to be between zero and a positive welfare level α . The idea is that a population A is better than another population B if and only if A is better than B for all critical levels in the interval. If A is better than B for only some critical levels in the interval, and B is better than A for some other critical levels, then A and B are incommensurable.¹⁷ According to this theory, incomplete critical-level utilitarianism, A and $A \cup B$ in Diagram 8.3 are incommensurable since, for some critical levels, the former is better than the latter, and for some other (low) critical levels, the reverse is true.

IV Subjunctive Weak Pareto

Consider, however, the following condition:

Subjunctive weak Pareto. If A would be better than B for everyone who would exist if A were to obtain, and for everyone who would exist if B were to obtain, then A is better than B .

This condition is a version of the standard weak Pareto condition (formulated in terms of ‘better for’) adjusted for the affirmative answer to the existential question. It seems an irresistible condition given that it can be better or worse for someone to exist than not to exist and given the present setting in which we disregard other values apart from welfare.

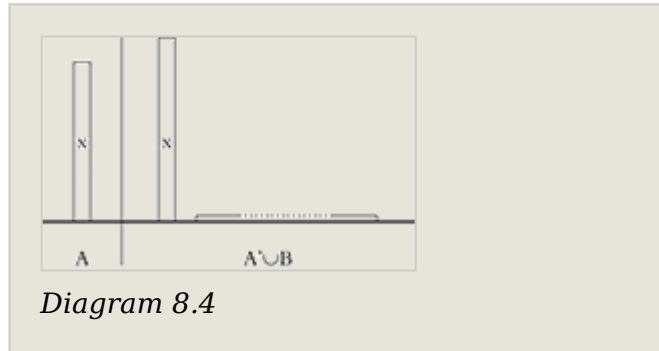
Consider now the outcomes presented in Diagram 8.4 below. Assume that A and A' consist of the same people, namely the x -people who enjoy very high welfare in both outcomes but higher in A' as compared to A . The B -people have very low but positive welfare. Again, A and $A' \cup B$ are incommensurable

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according to incomplete critical-level utilitarianism since, for some critical levels, the former population is better than the latter, and for some other (low) critical levels, the reverse is true.

(p.117)

Suppose, however, that A is the case. Then $A' \cup B$ is better than A for all the people that exist since the x -people enjoy higher welfare in A' as



compared to A . Assume instead that $A' \cup B$ is the case. Since the B -people have positive welfare, $A' \cup B$ is better for them than A given the affirmative answer to the existential question. As before, $A' \cup B$ is better than A for x -people. Thus, $A' \cup B$ is better than A for everybody who would exist irrespective of whether it is A or $A' \cup B$ that obtains. It follows from subjunctive weak Pareto that $A' \cup B$ is better than A . Hence, the affirmative answer to the existential question in conjunction with subjunctive weak Pareto rules out all theories which imply that $A' \cup B$ and A are incommensurable, such as incomplete critical-level utilitarianism.

A possible rejoinder here is that we should not only have a critical level for 'better' but also for 'better for'.¹⁸ Above, we assumed that given the positive answer to the existential question, it is better for a person to exist with positive welfare than not to exist at all, which indeed seems plausible.

However, one might deny this by severing the relation between 'positive welfare' and 'better for' by claiming that even if a person would enjoy positive welfare, it might not be better for her to exist than not to exist. Rather, in some interval of welfare levels it would be neither better nor worse for a person to exist than not to exist but instead incommensurable in value for her. In other words, below a certain critical *welfare* level, but above the neutral welfare level, the negative answer to the existential question holds true. As long as the definition of a life with positive welfare

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does not imply that it is better for a person to exist with positive welfare than not to exist at all, this is a conceptual possibility.¹⁹

Given this approach, and assuming that the welfare of the *B*-people in Diagram 8.4 is below the critical welfare level, it would no longer follow from the affirmative answer to the existential question that $A' \cup B$ is better than *A* for the *B*-people. Hence, subjunctive weak Pareto would not imply that that $A' \cup B$ is better than *A*, and it would still be open to us to claim that these two outcomes are incommensurable in value.

(p.118) There are, unfortunately, two problems with this proposal. First, given the affirmative answer to the existential question, the most attractive and congenial definition (or criterion) of a life with positive welfare is in terms of 'better for':

A life has positive welfare if and only if it is better for a person to exist with such a life than not to exist at all.

Given this definition, there is no conceptual space for claiming that a person would enjoy positive welfare but that it might not be better for her to exist than not to exist.

Secondly, in combination with the restriction, this proposal yields violation of the following condition, which is, I believe, as uncontroversial as it gets in population axiology:

The egalitarian dominance condition. If *A* is a perfectly equal population of the same size as population *B*, and every person in *A* has higher welfare than every person in *B*, then *A* is better than *B*, other things being equal.

Consider two same-sized mutually disjoint populations *A* and *B* in which everyone enjoys positive welfare albeit below the critical welfare level. Assume that *A* is a perfectly equal population and that every person in *A* has higher welfare than every person in *B*. Accordingly, egalitarian dominance ranks *A* as better than *B*.

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However, since the welfare of all the *A*-people are below the critical welfare level, *A* would not be better than *B* for the *A*-people if it were to obtain (nor, of course, would *B* be better than *A* for the *A*-people if it came about). Rather, *A* and *B* are incommensurable in value for the *A*-people. Since *A* would not be better than *B* for anyone, irrespectively of whether *A* or *B* were to obtain, it follows from the subjunctive person affecting restriction that *A* cannot be better than *B*, a clear violation of egalitarian dominance.

V The Repugnant Conclusion

In light of the above results, one might suspect that rescuing the person affecting restriction by adopting the affirmative answer to the existential question will make it hard to avoid the well-known counterintuitive implications of classical utilitarianism, such as the repugnant conclusion.²⁰ This is true, I fear. Consider the following very weak inequality aversion condition:

The inequality aversion condition. For any triplet of welfare levels *A*, *B*, and *C*, *A* higher than *B*, and *B* higher than *C*, and for any population *A* with welfare *A*, there is a larger population *C* with welfare *C* such that a perfectly equal population *B* of the same size as *AUC* and with welfare *B* is at least as good as *AUC*, other things being equal.²¹

(p.119) Another way of stating the inequality aversion condition is that, for any welfare level of the best off and worst off, and for any number of best off lives, there is a (much) greater number of worst off lives such that it would be at least as good to have an equal distribution of welfare on any level higher than the worst off, other things being equal.

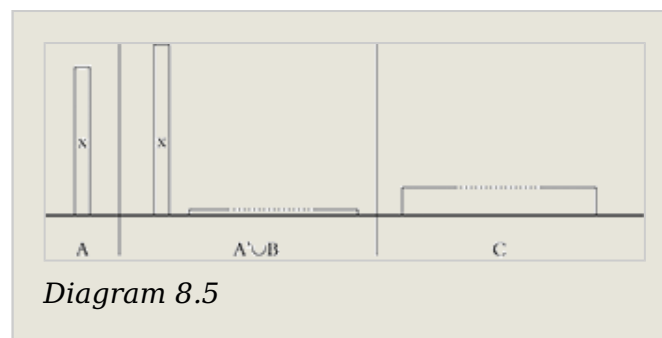
It is a very weak egalitarian condition since it can be satisfied by a theory which demands that the total welfare must be greater for a population with perfect equality to be better than an unequal population of the same size. Moreover, it is also compatible with principles that give much greater weight to the welfare of the best off as compared to the welfare of the

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worst off. For example, a theory which requires that to compensate for one person falling from twenty to ten units of welfare, a hundred people have to be moved from zero to ten units, is compatible with the inequality aversion condition. In that sense, its name is a bit misleading since it is compatible with quite non-egalitarian theories. Roughly, inequality aversion only rules out theories that imply that we should always or sometimes give some kind of 'lexical priority' to the best off. A simple example of the former theory is 'Maximax': maximize the welfare of the best off (we shall below briefly discuss another more subtle theory that violates inequality aversion).²²

Now, consider the populations shown in Diagram 8.5 below. A and $A' \cup B$ are the same populations as in Diagram 8.4. The C -people have very low positive welfare but higher than the B -people. The size of C is the same as $A' \cup B$.

According to inequality aversion, there is a size of the B -population such that C is at least as good as $A' \cup B$.



As we saw

above, it follows from subjunctive weak Pareto and the affirmative answer that $A' \cup B$ is better than A . It follows by transitivity that C is better than A . Hence, the affirmative answer to the existential question together with subjunctive weak Pareto and inequality aversion yield the repugnant conclusion:

(p.120) **The repugnant conclusion.** For any perfectly equal population consisting of people with very high positive welfare, there is a population consisting of people with very low positive welfare which is better, other things being equal.²³

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Hence, saving the person affecting restriction by adopting the affirmative answer to the existential question comes at a high price: we cannot avoid the repugnant conclusion, an implication of paradigmatically impersonal theories such as classical utilitarianism. Moreover, this is an implication that many find highly counterintuitive, and especially those that have embraced the restriction.

One might find the dialectic here a bit hard to follow: How can the above derivation be a problem for the restriction when we did not use it in the derivation? It is true that in this derivation of the repugnant conclusion, we did not make use of the restriction, but of subjunctive weak Pareto. The latter principle is very plausible given that we accept the affirmative answer to the existential question. So it is this affirmative answer, rather than the restriction, that makes the above derivation of the repugnant conclusion possible. However, the affirmative answer is needed to make the restriction plausible, as was shown by the future bliss or hell case.

On the other hand, the above derivation also shows that, given the affirmative answer, rejecting or weakening the restriction will not suffice to avoid the repugnant conclusion.

Of course, a defender of the restriction and/or the affirmative answer might here decide to reject the inequality aversion condition instead and in that way block the derivation of the repugnant conclusion, perhaps by an appeal to some kind of superior goods that putatively would be lost in C as compared to $A' \cup B$.²⁴

An obvious drawback of this move is, of course, that it is very counterintuitive to reject the compelling inequality aversion condition. Most theories imply, and most theorists endorse, much stronger inequality aversion conditions.

Moreover, the inequality aversion condition can be derived from an even more intuitively compelling condition, the non-elitism condition, which roughly says that there is at least some very small decrease in welfare for *one* of the best off persons which can be compensated for by an increase in welfare for at least *some* (possibly much greater) number of

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the worst off people, to the effect that the involved people enjoy the same level of welfare.²⁵

(p.121) Finally, it is not at all apparent that C must involve less superior goods than $A' \cup B$ since what might explain the lower welfare level in C does not have to be a smaller amount of superior goods but that there is more pain and suffering in the C -lives which to a sufficient extent outweighs the superior goods to make their welfare very low.²⁶

Nevertheless, the implausibility of rejecting inequality aversion is actually not the main problem with this move in the present dialectic. Rather, the problem is that it still would be true that it is not an appeal to the restriction that is solving the problem here. Rejecting inequality aversion and non-elitism is equally open to those who reject the restriction and defend impersonal welfarist theories. So it would not be the restriction, after all, which is helping us with avoiding the implications of impersonal welfarist theories. On the contrary, rescuing the restriction by adopting the affirmative answer limits our options drastically since, given the latter answer, we are forced to give up inequality aversion and non-elitism or subjunctive weak Pareto, or accept the repugnant conclusion—all very unattractive options.

VI The Person Affecting Restriction and Population Ethics Reconsidered

The derivation of the repugnant conclusion in the preceding section relied on subjunctive weak Pareto. Perhaps a defender of the restriction and/or the affirmative answer to the existential question could take this derivation 'as a reason to be cautious with seemingly irresistible conditions such as Subjunctive Weak Pareto'.²⁷ I have no suggestion, however, how one could undermine the intuitive strength of subjunctive weak Pareto given the affirmative answer to the existential question. In any case, even if such a reason could be found, we would still run into problems with the repugnant conclusion as long as we hold on to the restriction. As we shall see, there is no population axiology that avoids this conclusion in a satisfying manner and which also satisfies the subjunctive person affecting restriction, inequality aversion, and

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egalitarian dominance.²⁸ Hence, in this demonstration, subjunctive weak Pareto is not involved, but rather it is the restriction itself that plays a leading role.

(p.122) Let me first introduce the following condition to the effect that the repugnant conclusion is false:

The quality condition. There is a perfectly equal population consisting of people with very high positive welfare which is at least as good as any population consisting of people with very low positive welfare, other things being equal.

Avoidance of the repugnant conclusion implies that there is at least one population with very high welfare which is at least as good as or incommensurable with all larger populations with very low welfare. The quality condition is logically stronger than avoidance of the repugnant conclusion since the former rules out axiologies that satisfy the latter by implying that at least one population with very high welfare is incommensurable with all populations with very low positive welfare, although none is at least as good as all such populations. This way of avoiding the repugnant conclusion is quite unsatisfactory, however, and does not capture most people's intuition about the conclusion, I surmise. Perhaps it can be reasonably believed that some populations with very high welfare are incommensurable with some populations with very low welfare, but that some of them are incommensurable with all larger populations with very low welfare seems, given that other things are equal, counterintuitive.

Now consider the outcomes presented in Diagram 8.6 below. Populations *B*, *C*, and *D* are three perfectly equal populations with very low positive welfare. There is higher welfare in *B* than in *C*, and higher in *C* than in *D*. *A* and *E* are two perfectly equal same-sized populations consisting of the *x*-people with very high positive welfare. The *x*-people are even better off in *E* as compared to *A*. Populations *B*, *C*, and $E \cup D$ consist of the *x*- and *y*-people and are thus all of the same size.

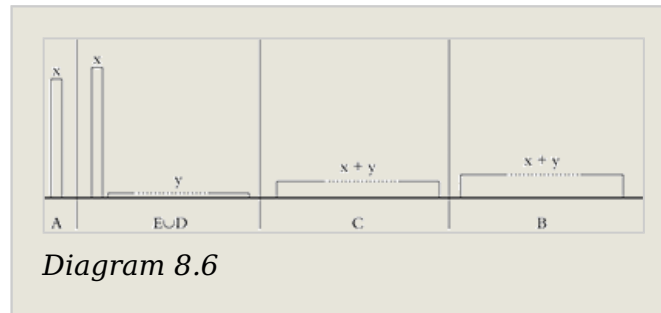
We can assume that *A* and *B* are two populations satisfying the quality condition such that *A* is at least as good as *B*.

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Moreover, we can stipulate that D is of such a size that the inequality aversion implies that C is at least as good as $E \cup D$. According to egalitarian dominance, B is better than C since there is perfect equality in B and everyone is better off as compared to in C .

(p.123) Since

A is at least as good as B ,
and B is better than C ,
it follows by transitivity that A is better than C .



Similarly, since C is at least as good as $E \cup D$, it follows that A is better than $E \cup D$. However, as the x -people in E are better off than the x -people in A , and the D -people have positive welfare, it follows from the subjunctive person affecting restriction, irrespective of which answer we give to the existential question, that A cannot be better than $E \cup D$ since A is not better for anyone in A or $E \cup D$. In other words, $E \cup D$ is not worse than A . Hence, the assumption that there is an axiology which satisfies all the adequacy conditions entails a contradiction, namely that A is better than $E \cup D$ and that $E \cup D$ is not worse than A . Thus, there is no population axiology which satisfies the subjunctive person affecting restriction, the egalitarian dominance, inequality aversion, and the quality condition.²⁹

In other words, contrary to what many seem to have believed, the restriction will not help us with the repugnant conclusion but rather make it very hard to avoid it.

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Notes:

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⁽²⁾ See Temkin (1993a: 248) and (1993b: 290) for a similar formulation. The term 'person affecting restriction' was introduced by Glover (1977: 66) but see also Narveson (1967).

⁽³⁾ The first three sections of this chapter draws heavily on Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2010, forthcoming(a)) and Arrhenius (2009, forthcoming).

⁽⁴⁾ Christian List and Wlodek Rabinowicz have suggested that 'Scandinavian existentialism' would be a more fitting term given the dominance of Scandinavian contributions to this

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topic. In light of John Broome's important contributions to the field, however, I think this term would be misleading (setting aside the possibility of declaring Broome an honorary Scandinavian).

⁽⁵⁾ See Temkin (1993a: §9.4, 1993b).

⁽⁶⁾ See Parfit (1984: 388) (for my formulation of this conclusion, see Section V of this chapter). For an overview of the counterintuitive implications of impersonal welfarist theories, see, e.g., Parfit (1984), Arrhenius et al. (2010), and Arrhenius (2000a, forthcoming).

⁽⁷⁾ See Arrhenius (2003a, 2009, forthcoming).

⁽⁸⁾ Three qualifications: (a) The label 'person affecting' might be misleading, since many theorists would, sensibly, weaken the restriction so as to also cover other sentient beings. Cf. Holtug (1996). (b) Since the person affecting restriction is formulated without a *ceteris paribus* clause, value pluralists are not likely to accept it since it leaves little room for other values apart from welfarist ones. Clearly, one might embrace non-welfarist values such as virtue, reward in accordance to desert, beauty, variety of natural species, etc. (for a discussion of value pluralism in connection with the restriction, see Arrhenius (2003a, 2009, forthcoming). Here I shall, however, only discuss implications of the restriction in cases where one can assume that non-welfarist values are not at stake. Hence, the arguments below also apply to the *ceteris paribus* version of the restriction, that is, the version that is of interest also to the value pluralists. (c) Certain welfarist theories are ruled out by the restriction already in the same people cases, such as some extreme versions of welfarist egalitarianism (Arrhenius 2009, forthcoming).

⁽⁹⁾ Broome (1999: 168, emphasis in the original). Note that this argument, if correct, would also work against the idea that existence could be worse for someone than non-existence. See also Buchanan et al. (2000: 234), Heyd (1988: 159–61, 1992: 124–5), Narveson (1967: 61), and Dasgupta (1995: 383) for similar arguments in favour of the negative answer to the existential question.

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(¹⁰) I discuss this at length in Arrhenius (forthcoming).

(¹¹) Let's call a component of life that neither makes this life better nor worse for the person living it a neutral welfare component. A hedonist, for example, would typically say that an experience which is neither pleasurable nor painful is neutral in value for a person and as such neither increases nor decreases a person's welfare. We shall say that a life has *neutral welfare* if and only if it is equally good for the person living it as a neutral welfare component is for a person, and that a life has *positive (negative)* welfare if and only if it has higher (lower) welfare than a life with neutral welfare. The above definition can of course be combined with other welfarist axiologies apart from hedonism, such as desire and objective list theories. Two remarks: first, these definitions of lives with neutral, positive, and negative welfare do not require comparing a life with non-existence, and thus don't prejudge the existential question. Secondly, we actually do not need an analysis of a neutral welfare in the present context but rather just a criterion, and the criterion can vary with different theories of welfare. For a discussion of alternative definitions of a neutral life, many of which would also work fine in the present context, see Arrhenius (2000a, forthcoming: chs. 2, 9) and Bykvist (2007b). See also Broome (1999, 2004) and Parfit (1984: 357-8 and Appendix G).

(¹²) This matter is discussed at length in Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2010, forthcoming(a)). The simple answer to why the absurd conclusion doesn't follow is that a triadic relation consisting in one state (having a certain life) being better for a person *p* than another state (non-existence) cannot hold unless its three relata exist. Now, the states in question are abstract entities and thus can be assumed to exist even if they do not actually obtain. Consequently, the triadic relation in question can indeed hold as long as also the third relatum, person *p*, exists. However, if persons are concrete objects, which is the received view, a person exists only insofar as she is alive. Consequently, even if it is better for *p* to exist than not to exist, assuming she has a life worth living, it doesn't follow that it would have been worse for *p* if she did not exist, since one of the relata, *p*, would then have been absent. What does

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follow is only that non-existence is worse for her than existence (since ‘worse’ is just the converse of ‘better’), but not that it would have been worse if she didn’t exist.

(¹³) This counterfactual invariance of the dyadic betterness relation is possible only because its *relata* (outcomes) can be assumed to exist even if they do not obtain. By contrast, the triadic relation of ‘better for’ can only satisfy a weaker condition of counterfactual invariance: if *A* would have been better for *p* than *B* if *B* obtained, then *A* is better for *p* than *B* even if *B* does not obtain, *provided that p exists*.

(¹⁴) Holtug (2004).

(¹⁵) I am here assuming that given the affirmative answer to the existential question, it is better for someone to exist with positive welfare than not to exist at all (more on this below).

(¹⁶) For the latter theory, see Blackorby et al. (1995, 1997, 2005) and Blackorby and Donaldson (1984). For a discussion of both theories, see Arrhenius (2000a,b, forthcoming, ch. 3 and 5).

(¹⁷) See Blackorby et al. (1997: 216–19, 226). That the critical levels consists of all numbers between zero and a positive welfare level is not part of Blackorby et al.’s definition of incomplete critical-level utilitarianism, but they assume this in their discussion of it. See also Blackorby et al. (2005: 219–21, 248–52). For a similar approach, see Broome (2004: 180 ff.) and Rabinowicz (2009).

(¹⁸) I’m grateful to Wlodek Rabinowicz for pressing me on this point.

(¹⁹) Recall that the definition of lives with neutral, positive, and negative welfare I suggested in note 11 above did not require the comparison of a life with non-existence and thus did not prejudge the existential question and whether it is better for a person to exist with positive welfare than not to exist at all.

(²⁰) As I have argued elsewhere, making population ethics more ‘person affecting’, so to speak, does not suffice to save it

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from counterintuitive implications (Arrhenius 2009, forthcoming).

(²¹) The *ceteris paribus* clause in the formulation is meant to rule out that the compared populations differ in any axiologically relevant aspect apart from individual welfare levels.

(²²) It should be noted that inequality aversion is applicable even if only ordinal measurement of welfare is possible. It only presupposes that lives can be ordered by the relation 'has at least as high welfare as'. Here is an example of a principle which only presupposes ordinal measurement of welfare and satisfies this condition: If the worst off make up at least 99 per cent of a population, then it would be better to have an equal distribution of welfare on any level higher than the worst off. Maximax, mentioned above, is an example of an ordinal principle that violates inequality aversion.

(²³) See Parfit (1984: 388). This formulation is more general than Parfit's apart from that he does not demand that the people with very high welfare are equally well off. Although it is through Parfit's writings that this implication of classical utilitarianism became widely discussed, it was already noted by Henry Sidgwick (1907: 415), before the turn of the century (but he didn't claim that it was 'repugnant', however). For other early sources of the repugnant conclusion, see Broad (1930: 249–50), McTaggart (1927: 452–3), and Narveson (1967).

(²⁴) For a detailed discussion of superior goods and the repugnant conclusion, see Arrhenius (2005; forthcoming) and Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2005, forthcoming(b)).

(²⁵) For an exact statement of this condition and the derivation of inequality aversion from it, see Arrhenius (2000a, 2001, 2003b, 2011, forthcoming).

(²⁶) One can also show that the affirmative answer to the existential question together with subjunctive weak Pareto and another weak condition yield the *negative repugnant conclusion*: For any population consisting of people with any very negative welfare, there is a population consisting of

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people with only slightly negative welfare which is worse, other things being equal. For a discussion of this conclusion, see Carlson (1998: 297 ff.; he calls it the 'Reverse Repugnant Conclusion' or 'RRC') who 'find[s] RRC very difficult to accept'. Since this conclusion might only involve bad welfare components, an appeal to superior goods to avoid it seems to be a non-starter.

(²⁷) Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (forthcoming(a)).

(²⁸) This also shows, contrary to what many seem to have believed, that the restriction will not help us with the repugnant conclusion *irrespective* of what answer one gives to the existential question (that is, even when coupled with the negative answer or some other possible answer).

(²⁹) I am grateful to Orri Stefánsson for discussion of this matter. He suggested a similar argument given full comparability between populations. The above demonstration did not presuppose full comparability (which is preferable since, as we have seen, some people have the intuition that A and $E \cup D$ might be incomparable in value and this is implied by some theories such as incomplete critical level utilitarianism).



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