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Persson's Merely Possible Persons³

In many cases, it seems, one possible outcome is worse than another in virtue of the well-being of people who do not exist in both. For example, it seems, creating a very unhappy person makes the world worse, other things being equal. And some would say that we make the world better, other things being equal, by creating a very happy person. It would be easy to justify such claims if it can be better, or worse, for a person to exist than not to exist. But that seems to require that things can be better, or worse, for a person even in a world in which she does not exist, which sounds paradoxical. This paradoxical-sounding claim has been defended by Ingmar Persson. He argues that in a world in which a person does not exist, she is a merely possible being – a being that has never existed and never will – and that for such beings it is worse not to exist than to exist with a good life. Furthermore, he argues for this claim from what he claims are “incontestable” premises. We argue that the premises are far from incontestable. The argument, as stated by Persson, has false premises and is invalid. We can reconstruct the argument to make it valid, but this still leaves us with some clearly contestable premises. Finally, we will argue that it is possible to make sense of our obligations to future generations without letting merely possible beings into the moral club.

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I

Many of our choices effect who will exist in the future, not just the obvious choice of having a child but also the choice of giving priority to young people over old when saving lives or offering generous state-funded parental leave. In at least some of these cases we want to say that one outcome is worse than another in virtue of the wellbeing of people who do not exist in both. For example, we want to say that creating a very unhappy person makes the world worse, other things being equal. Some would also say that we make the world better, other things being equal, by creating a very happy person (or a sufficiently large number of such persons). It would be easy to justify these verdicts if it can be better, or worse, for a person to exist than not to exist. But can it really be better, or worse, for a person to exist than not to exist? That seems to require that things can be better, or worse, for a person even in a world in which she does not exist, which sounds paradoxical.

This paradoxical-sounding claim is defended in Ingmar Persson's latest book *Inclusive Ethics*.⁴ More specifically, he argues that in a world in which a person does not exist, she is a merely possible being – a being that has never existed and never will – and that for such beings it is worse not to exist than to exist with a good life. Furthermore, he argues for this claim from what he claims are “incontestable” premises. We shall argue that the premises are far from incontestable. In fact, the argument, as it stated, has obviously false premises and is also invalid. It is possible to reconstruct the argument so that it becomes valid, but this still leaves us with some clearly contestable premises. Finally, we will argue that it is possible to make sense of our obligations to future generations without letting merely possible beings into the moral club.

II

Persson's master argument is as follows:⁵

- (1) For a being who has never existed, nothing is either intrinsically good or bad.
- (2) The fact that nothing is either intrinsically good or bad for a being is worse for it than the fact that things are overall intrinsically good for it.

Therefore,

⁴ Persson (2017).

⁵ Persson (2017: 61).

- (3) Not existing is worse for a being than existing with a life in which things are overall intrinsically good for it.

First, an important clarification: (1) talks about a being who *has never* existed. This does not rule out that it *will* exist in the future. But Persson wants to say that non-existence can be worse for *merely possible* beings, beings that not only never *have* existed but also never *will* exist. So, readers should interpret (1) and (3) as talking about merely possible beings.

One problem with the argument concerns (2). Persson insists that (2) is “incontestable,”⁶ but as stated it is clearly false. This is because the two different facts mentioned in (2) are *incompatible*. Necessarily, if it is a fact that nothing is intrinsically good or bad for a certain being, then it is *not* a fact that things are overall intrinsically good for this being. Hence, it can’t be true that *the fact* that nothing is intrinsically good or bad for a being is worse for it than *the fact* that things are overall intrinsically good for it.⁷

Another problem is that the facts compared in (2) are *evaluative* facts, facts about whether things are good or bad for a being. But it is not clear whether it can be true that one evaluative fact is worse than another for a being.

Third, the argument, as it stands, is invalid—(3) does not follow from the conjunction of (1) and (2). According to (2), a certain *evaluative fact* is worse for a being than a certain other *evaluative fact*. But ‘not existing’ in (3) refers to the *non-evaluative* state of affairs (or fact) of a being not existing.

III

The following reconstruction of Persson’s argument, where evaluative fact-talk is replaced by non-evaluative state-of-affairs-talk throughout, avoids the problems of the originally-stated argument:

- (4) For a merely possible being, non-existence is neither overall good nor overall bad.

- (5) Any state of affairs which is neither overall good nor overall bad for a being is overall worse for it than a state of affairs that is overall good for it.

⁶ Persson (2017: 61).

⁷ This is an instance of the ‘relata problem’. See, for example, Arrhenius & Rabinowicz, (2010: especially 404–408), Arrhenius & Rabinowicz (2014: 432), Bykvist (2015: 90–91), Holtug (2010: 140–141).

Therefore,

- (6) For a merely possible being, non-existence is overall worse than an existence that is overall good for it.

This reconstruction of Persson's argument is logically valid, assuming 'existence' and 'non-existence' pick out states of affairs. Moreover, it avoids incoherent evaluative comparisons of incompatible evaluative facts. Finally, we have made clear that the relevant comparisons concern the overall values of states of affairs (existence or non-existence), i.e., the total intrinsic value for the being of all the things that the states of affairs would realize, if they obtained.⁸ It should be added that the reason why (4) is true is that everything lacks positive and negative intrinsic value for such a being.

But the argument is still problematic. Take premise (5) first. This premise states that something that is overall good for a being is better for a being than something that *lacks* overall positive and negative value for it. But in order for something to be better for a being than something else both things need to have value for the being. The same holds for any other comparative notion. For one thing to be taller than another, both things need to have length. For one thing to be heavier than another both things need to have weight. For one thing to have a higher temperature than another, both things need to have temperature. The question is then what value non-existence has for a merely possible being.

Persson states that it has neutral value for the merely possible being. Indeed, he claims that everything is neutral for a merely possible being. However, he characterizes 'neutral value for a being' as something that is neither intrinsically good nor intrinsically bad for a being'.⁹

But this is not a plausible characterization of 'neutral value for a being' because, plausibly, some states of affairs are *undefined* in value for a being. Possible candi-

⁸ In conversation, Persson has told us that he accepts this reconstruction, but would prefer (2) to be formulated subjunctively as 'Any state of affairs which would be neither overall good nor overall bad for a being would be overall worse for it than a state of affairs that would overall good for it' just to make clear that states of affairs have value for a being only when they obtain. We shall assume this reading implicitly in the following. He has also told us that he prefers that the premises be stated in terms of intrinsic goodness and badness for a being rather than in terms of the overall goodness and badness that states of affairs have for a being. This is because he thinks that non-existence could be extrinsically good or bad for a being by excluding an existence that would be good or bad for that being. On our view, the overall goodness or badness that a state of affairs has for a being does not depend on this kind of preventive value.

⁹ Persson (2017: 11, 57, 61). Nils Holtug defends a similar definition of 'zero value for a being' in his (2001), but he has since given it up because of the objection raised here. For further debate about the intelligibility of assigning neutral or zero value to non-existence, see Roberts (2003), Johansson (2010), Bykvist (2007), Bykvist (2015: 90-91).

dates are contradictory states of affairs (e.g., that $2 + 2 = 5$), necessary states of affairs (e.g., that $2 + 2 = 4$), evaluative states of affairs (e.g., that happiness is good for people), and states of affairs that concern other people's wellbeing (e.g., that a stranger is unhappy).¹⁰

Furthermore, being neutral for one is different from being neither good nor bad for one. If something is neutral for one, then it has a certain *value* that is neither positive nor negative, but which can be compared to positive and negative values. This is analogous to

(a) having zero temperature, which is to have certain temperature that is neither positive nor negative, and thus different from lacking positive and negative temperature just because one lacks any temperature, or

(b) having a weight that is neither heavy nor light, which is different from being neither heavy nor light just because one lacks any weight, or

(c) having a height that is neither tall nor short, which is different from being neither tall nor short just because one lacks any height.¹¹

Persson could deny that things must have value to stand in value relations, or deny that neutral value is a value in its own right. But such claims are highly contestable, and we need arguments for why value comparisons differ so radically from other comparisons. No such argument is provided in the book.

Premise (4) is also far from incontestable. Indeed, the claim that there are merely possible beings is one of the most contestable claims in modal metaphysics.¹² Persson claims not only that there are beings that do not exist, but also that things are neutral for them and, in virtue of premise (5), that things can be better or worse for them.

Consider the existence claim first. On its face, it seems incoherent, since it seems to assert the *existence* of *non-existent* beings. But Persson denies the charge of incoherence because he thinks that there are different senses of 'exist' and 'there are':

¹⁰ On the distinction between being neutral for and having undefined value for, see Bradley (2009: 98-104), Luper (2007).

¹¹ These examples are relevant not only to the debate about the value of existence, but to the more general issue of how to understand the nature of properties. For more on this general issue, see Balashov (1999).

¹² For a critique of the view that there are merely possible beings, see Stalnaker (2012: especially chs. 1 and 2).

In one sense of ‘exist’, it is true that there are merely possible beings because this follows from the clearly true claim that it is possible that some beings will begin to exist in the future. This is the sense in which I believe there to be merely possible and, thus, non-existent beings. I cannot provide a philosophically adequate explication of this sense, but there are many commonsensical claims to which we can permissibly help ourselves, though we cannot accurately expound their sense philosophically. (2017: 60-61)

Persson’s claim that

A. there are merely possible beings

follows from

B. it is possible that some beings will begin to exist in the future.¹³

is puzzling. B states that in some possible world some beings will begin to exist in the future. Why would it follow (logically) from this claim that there are and thus exist, *in a different sense*, merely possible beings *here in the actual world*? Compare: it is possible that the pope has two children in the future, and thus possible that two children of the pope will begin to exist in the future. But why would it follow from this that there exist, *in a different sense*, merely possible beings *here in the actual world*? Even if we grant Persson that there are different senses of existence, we still need to know how to derive A from B. We could derive it, if we accepted the Barcan formula as a bridge principle:

If it is possible that there is a being that is F, then there is a being such that it is possible that it is F.

For then we could make use of the following instance of the Barcan formula, (where ‘there are’ is equated with ‘there exist’, in which ‘exist’ has a different meaning from ‘exist’ in ‘begin to exist’):

¹³ We take B to say that it is possible that it will be the case that some beings begin to exist, not as saying that it is possible that there are now some beings that will begin to exist, since the latter claim commits one to the possibility of merely future beings, beings that do not exist yet but will exist in the future, a commitment which is almost as contestable as the commitment to merely possible beings.

If it is possible that there are beings that will begin to exist, then there are beings that are such that it is possible that they begin to exist.

and from B derive that there are beings that are such that it is possible that they begin to exist, which entails A, assuming that they in fact will not begin to exist. But the Barcan formula is far from incontestable, and Persson claims (in correspondence) that this is not what he had in mind.¹⁴ So, we are at a loss as to how he can incontestably derive A from B.

Even if we could somehow establish that A follows from B, we need to know what the *relation* is between merely possible beings in one world and beings that begin to exist in some alternative possible world. Either they are identical, or they are not. Both options are problematic.

If they are identical, then we must say that a merely possible being which is not concrete (not located in space or time and lacks causal powers) could have been concrete in the sense of beginning to exist, i.e., existing in time. But being non-concrete is surely a very good candidate for a property that is essential to its bearers: if something is non-concrete, then it is essentially non-concrete. Similarly, if something is concrete, it is essentially concrete.

If they are not identical, then we will have problems understanding how Persson's view applies to existing *flesh and blood people*. Consider for example, a child born with a painful and fatal condition who lived in agony for a few months before dying. Call this child Tommy, and suppose that he lived a horrible life. Persson seems committed to saying that things would have been better for Tommy if he had not existed. As we point out in the last section, according to Persson all reasons are comparative, which he takes to mean that in order to say that we have reasons of beneficence not to create someone we need to show that not creating the person would be *worse* for the person. Now, we do want to say about Tommy that we did have at least some reason not to create him (but perhaps not overall reason). But if we had not created Tommy, he would not have been around in any sense, since being concrete is essential to Tommy. Since Tommy would not have been around, things would not have been worse for him, for 'worse for' is a relation that requires a subject for whom things are worse. Now, it is true that we are assuming that there is a *distinct* merely possible being in the Tommy-less world. But even if things are worse for it, this does not establish that things are also worse for *Tommy* in this world, for we have assumed that the merely possible being is not identical to Tommy.¹⁵

¹⁴ See Williamson (2013: ch. 2) for a discussion of the Barcan formula.

¹⁵ In conversation, Persson seems to go for this horn of the dilemma. He compares merely possible beings to abstract properties and concrete beings with property bearers. Merely possible beings are

Now let us turn to the value claim: that things can be neutral for, or better or worse for, merely possible beings. It is far from obvious that things can be better or worse for merely possible beings (when they are merely possible beings). After all, a merely possible being is not a concrete being, an animal, a conscious being, a human, a male or female, or a parent or non-parent. At most, it is a *merely possible* concrete being, a *merely possible* animal, and so on. Why think that a being that merely possibly exemplifies any of these features can nevertheless stand in value relations? Why not think instead that standing in a value relation requires being concrete in some way, for example, having a mind, body, being in space or time, or having causal power? We need an argument for the controversial claim that things can be better or worse for merely possible—and hence non-concrete—beings.

Persson offers an analogy to support this claim. The analogy involves a comparison between a non-existent being and a certain type of existing being—an anencephalic infant—that lacks the consciousness-generating parts of the brain and so never becomes conscious:

It seems indisputable that, given that existing without consciousness, like anencephalic infants do, is neither intrinsically good nor bad for them, this is worse for them than having consciousness and leading a life in which things are predominantly good for them. But we have seen that non-conscious beings are like non-existent beings in that nothing is either intrinsically good or bad ... for them. Therefore, non-existence is worse for a being than a predominantly intrinsically good existence, just as its existence is worse for a non-conscious being than a good existence. (2017: 62)

According to Persson, the crucial similarity between the anencephalic infant and the merely possible being is that both lack consciousness. This is supposed to show that nothing is either intrinsically good or bad for them, and hence that the lack of conscious existence is neutral for them. The analogy is contestable, however, for there is a clear difference between the two beings. Although both lack consciousness, the anencephalic infant, unlike the merely possible being, is a concrete being and an animal. The merely possible being is only *merely possibly* concrete and *merely possibly* an animal. For this reason, the anencephalic infant is a better candidate for a being for which things can be neutral. Remember that being neutral for is not just a lack of the relations being good for and being bad for; it is an evaluative relation in its own right. Note also that the analogy completely breaks down for flesh-and-blood

‘actualized’ by concrete beings, but not identical to them. However, this does not answer the question of how things are worse for Tommy in a Tommy-less world.

individuals, such as the previously discussed Tommy, for he would not exist in any sense if he were not created (assuming that such a concrete individual could not have been identical to a merely possible being.)

One possible reply is to say that in order for states of affairs to have value for a being it is enough that the being has a *capacity* for being concrete, an animal, and so on, and both the anencephalic infant and the merely possible being have (some of) these capacities. This reply works at most for merely possible beings; it does not work for the flesh-and-blood Tommy, since he does not exist at all in the Tommy-less world (assuming, again, that he could not be identical to a merely possible being), and thus cannot exemplify any capacities in this world). For this reply to succeed one must assume that one's being such that one possibly has *F* is sufficient for one's having a capacity to have *F*. But this assumption about the relation between modal properties and capacities is far from obvious. For example, from the mere fact that you possibly jump to the moon, i.e., that there is a possible world in which you do this, it does not follow that you have the capacity to jump to the moon.¹⁶ To have a capacity to do or have something (in the ordinary sense of 'capacity') requires more than just having the purely modal feature of being such that one possibly does or has it. Arguably, the capacity must be somehow grounded in features that are not purely modal.

Another problem with the analogy is that it assumes that the lack of conscious experience is worse for the anencephalic than having a conscious good life. However, whether this is true depends on which theory of our identity is correct. To see this, suppose that doctors somehow manage to repair and supplement the anencephalic infant's brain so that it has all the relevant consciousness-generating parts. Assume that our identity is essentially tied to certain consciousness-generating parts of the brain so that an anencephalic infant, which lacks these parts, cannot be identical to a being that has them.¹⁷ Then a *new being*, one of "us", comes into existence when the brain is repaired and supplanted with more brain matter, and things are good for this being. Call the anencephalic infant A and the new being B.

Now, when B begins to exist, either A ceases to exist, or A continues to exist. If A ceases to exist, then A is not better off after the brain reconstruction, since A does not have any valuable experiences after the reconstruction. If A continues to exist, then since A and B are not identical, it is not clear how the fact that B is well-off can explain that A is better off. One option is to say that A is better off in virtue of having B, who is well-off, as a part. More exactly, the idea is that A is conscious in a *derivative* sense—i.e. in the sense of having the essentially conscious B as a part—and this

¹⁶ Johansson (2010) makes this important observation.

¹⁷ See, e.g. Unger (1990), Unger (2000).

explains why B's pleasant experiences make A better off.¹⁸ The details of this view must be worked out, but it is clearly a contestable view. It is not obvious that something's having a conscious being for whom things can be good (or bad, or neutral) as a proper part is sufficient for *its* being such that things can be good (or bad, or neutral) for *it*.¹⁹

To see the problem of having too many beneficiaries even clearer, suppose that a human animal is cloned from some of A's cells, and that by altering certain genes, the clone develops without a brain. Call the clone A*. Next, suppose that B is operated on by a procedure that involves the removal and transplantation of the brain from A's skull to A*'s skull. As a result of the operation, A* acquires B as a conscious proper part, and A becomes brainless. Suppose that B benefits from this procedure by experiencing a slight increase in quality of life as a result of the transplant, and that B goes on to enjoy a life that is very good in absolute terms. If a human animal can benefit from acquiring a conscious being as a proper part, then the transfer of the brain from A to A* should render A* *better off*. Similarly, A should be *worse off* as a result of losing B as a part. But it is much more plausible that B is *the only* being in this case who is affected for better or worse.²⁰

If B is the only beneficiary in this case, then A* does not benefit by gaining B as a proper part. In that case we should also think that A, the anencephalic infant in Persson's example, would not benefit from gaining B as a proper part. We should instead think that, in this case, B is the only being for whom things have positive value. From this it follows that the anencephalic infant is not better off after the brain reconstruction.

IV

So far, we have scrutinized Persson's argument for the claim that non-existence is worse for a merely possible being than an existence in which things are overall

¹⁸ For defenses of the view that a being can be conscious derivatively in virtue of having a conscious being as a part, see Persson (1999). Persson does not ultimately endorse this view, but defends it against certain objections. Proponents of this view include McMahan (2002: ch. 1), Campbell & McMahan (2016).

¹⁹ Hud Hudson defends a similar claim regarding moral status: having a being with moral status as a proper part is not sufficient for having moral status. See Hudson (2001: 155).

²⁰ Notice that if A* benefits from the transplant, this cannot be wholly explained in terms of B's benefiting from the transplant and A*'s having B as a proper part. For A*'s benefit and B's benefit could be of different sizes. For B, the benefit might only be very slight, but for A*, the benefit would be enormous—it would be the difference between being permanently unconscious and being conscious with a very good life. But the claim that there are benefits of different sizes in this case is bizarre. It is much more natural to say that the only benefit is the one that is enjoyed by B.

intrinsically good for that being. It seems to us that Persson has failed to establish the conclusion of his argument.

Is this bad news? It would not be bad news if our obligations of beneficence to future generations in non-identity cases can be explained by appealing to their existence being *good* or *bad* for them. For example, we can have a reason to create a person if her life would be good for her. We don't need to say that her existence would be *better* for her than her non-existence.

However, Persson is not convinced that appealing to what would be good or bad for a person (as opposed to what would be better or worse for her) can justify any choice to create or refrain from creating a person. He provides both a specific argument and a general argument. His specific argument is this. Suppose that you can either create A with a good life or give a benefit to a different person, B, who would exist independently of your actions.

Then if you bring the being (A) into existence, you would have done what most benefits the beings who morally count. But, on the other hand, if you do not bring this being into existence, you would also have done what most benefits the beings (B) who morally count, since now the being (A) that you could have brought into existence does not count morally because, being forever non-existent, it cannot be said to have been harmed by being denied existence. Therefore, you do not have a reason to bring a being into existence rather than not to bring it into existence if it can be benefited only in a non-comparative sense because if you do not act on the reason, it dissolves, and there is no reason to which you have acted contrary. (2017: 59)

This argument is not convincing. Persson assumes that the defenders of a reason to create the non-comparative benefit of a good life must be *moral actualists*. He assumes that they must say that you have a reason to bring about a non-comparative benefit only if the beneficiary actually exists (or will exist).²¹ It is true that this view will lead to the problems Persson presents. But one can formulate the relevant reason in non-actualist ways. For example, one can say that if it holds that one can perform an action that would bring about an outcome in which someone will lead a good life, then this fact provides a reason to perform the act. This view will not lead to the problems Persson presents, since on this view whether one has the reason does not depend on who does exist and will exist. It is enough that the relevant

²¹ Throughout this section, when we refer to reasons, we have in mind specifically non-instrumental reasons of beneficence—those grounded in considerations of what would benefit individuals. According to Persson, such reasons make up one important class of moral reasons; the others concern autonomy and egalitarian justice. For further details, see Persson (2017: ch. 1).

counterfactuals are true. In the case Persson depicts we can use this account to decide what to do. We know that one action is such that if it were performed, then someone would lead a good life, and if the alternative action were performed, then a distinct individual would exist and lead an even better life. On the basis of these facts, one can say that one has more reason to perform the second act than the first.

Persson's general argument for there being no reason to benefit a being in a non-comparative sense unless one thereby also benefits her in a comparative sense is as follows:

To ascertain that an action would provide someone with a non-comparative benefit is (...) not sufficient to show that—as far as this individual is concerned—there is reason to perform the action. For it may be that the outcome of performing the action is not better, all things considered for the individual, than the outcome of not performing it because bestowing this benefit removes or prevents the individual's having or getting an *even greater* benefit. Thus, in order to determine that—as far as this being is concerned—you have reason to perform the action, you need to ascertain (...) that the action benefits the being in the comparative sense. (2017: 58, italics added)

We agree with Persson that there is no contrastive reason to give a person a non-comparative benefit rather than do what results in her having *an even greater benefit*. However, this does not show that there is no contrastive reason to give her a certain non-comparative benefit – a pleasure, say – rather than do what results in her not having this benefit. Thus, we think, Persson has failed to establish that the only reason to create a being with a good life is that existence with a good life is *better for that being* than non-existence. We can have a contrastive reason to create a person who will have a good life rather than do what results in her not existing at all, and thus not having any non-comparative benefit.

V

We have scrutinized Persson's argument for the claim that non-existence is worse for a merely possible being than an existence in which things are overall good for that being and we have found it wanting. Far from being "incontestable" the argument's premises, as initially stated, are clearly false, and the argument is logically invalid. Next, we presented what we take to be the most promising reconstruction of Persson's argument. Although the reconstructed argument is valid, the premises are still *highly contestable*. They assume that there are merely possible beings and that things can be better or worse for them. Persson's argument

for the existence claim is not convincing and his argument for the value claim is based on a shaky analogy with anencephalic infants. Finally, we showed that Persson is not justified in his dismissal of the idea that we can explain our obligations to future generations by appealing to facts about their existence being good or bad for them.

In sum, Persson has not made a convincing case for giving merely possible persons membership in the moral club. They will have to look for a different guarantor.

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