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Climate change, non-identity and moral ontology

by Jonathan M. Hoffmann

My students tend to rank Parfit's *Energy Policy and the Further Future*¹ among their favourite pieces. It is a marvellously argued, eye-opening paper. One of the most interesting passages comes right at the end, when Parfit suggests that we should act as if we had never realised that the non-identity problem exists:

“When we are discussing social policies, should we ignore the point about personal identity? Should we allow ourselves to say that a choice like that of the Risky Policy or of Depletion might be against the interests of people in the further future? This is not true. Should we pretend that it is? [...] I would not want people to conclude that we can be less concerned about the more remote effects of our social policies. So I would be tempted to suppress the argument for this conclusion.” (2010 [1983], 119)

In the paper, Parfit continuously stresses the implications of our views on personal identity. He differentiates between what he later, in his *Reasons and Persons*, calls a “narrow” and a “wide” person-affecting view (1984, ch. 18).² On a narrow person-affecting view, we take seriously each person's identity and assume that it is deter-

mined by its genome which is a product of a certain ovum and a certain sperm cell (112-113). On this view, we may then evaluate an action by considering its impact on each individual that is affected. An action is, thus, better or worse because it is better or worse for someone.

Consequently, there may be alternative actions available to perform that *seem* better or worse, but aren't really, as they are not better or worse for someone. One example that illustrates this point is the case of a 14-year-old who decides to have a child and, due to her age, gives the boy she conceives a bad start in life (113). In response, one may want to argue that she should have had a child later and that that child would have had a better start in life. This, however, overlooks that the boy that has been born to the young mother could not have been born later: the child she actually had could only come into existence because she decided to become a mother when she was 14. Hence, Parfit argues, we can “not claim that, in having this child, what she did was worse for *him*” (113, italics in the original).³

Let us now turn to the wide person-affecting view. On this view, we may not consider the effect on each individual but should consider the overall wellbeing of all individuals for each available action.

Taking this perspective, it does not matter whether the individuals that are affected are identical to those individuals that would have been affected had another option been taken. The wide person-affecting view is ignorant regarding personal identity. Accordingly, on a wide person-affecting view, a decision can be better or worse despite not being better or worse for someone. In the case of the young girl, this view underpins Parfit's intuition that she should have waited, for the child that would have been born later would have had a better start in life and overall wellbeing would assumedly have been higher. So, on this view, one can say that the mother acted wrongly as she could have done better by having a child later. Parfit contends that the wide person-affecting view must be broadly utilitarian in its approach, as he believes that an appeal to rights cannot solve the problem – people would rather waive their rights than not be born at all.⁴ In *Reasons and Persons* (ch. 17, 18 and 19), he discusses some versions of the wide person-affecting view and finds that they also have troubling consequences, among them the repugnant conclusion and the mere addition-paradox. To sum up. On the narrow person-affecting view, we are not able to say that the girl wronged her child, while Parfit's wide person-affecting view allows us to say she did wrong. However, the wide person-affecting view has some very undesirable consequences, too. My suggestion, then, is this: let us adopt a more plausible version of a wide person-affecting view. As Jeffrey Reiman argues,⁵ we should make use of Rawls's original position⁶ when thinking about non-identity cases. Rawls designs the original position as the fair circumstances for a hypothetical contract that can be imagined by any individual to have access to. Because of the veil of ignorance, people in the original position lack any knowledge of their personal identity, their capabilities, their age, gender, race, intelligence, status, etc. Importantly, they also don't know the generation they belong to. Such a view of persons may also be called the "citizen type" view.⁷ Instead of focusing on the individual "token" with all its personal features, we should only consider the "type" with its "identity independent features".⁸ On such a view we can consider various hypothetical outcomes of policy options and compare them, but without the need to aggregate the wellbeing of all those (possibly) affected and without falling for the repugnant conclusion and the like, while at the same time being able avoid the non-identity trap that may lead us to conclude that the wellbeing of people in the far future is morally insignificant. In the case of the young girl we can, on this

view, say that she did wrong her child as she did not fulfil his right to normal functioning.⁹

What this comment thus suggests is (a) that we should carefully reflect upon which view on personal identity we employ when we think about our responsibility to future people, for example with regard to the climate crisis, and (b) that a Rawls-inspired "citizen-type" view may provide a good stance for such reasoning. Indeed, on such a view, there is no need to "suppress" the argument as Parfit suggests for the narrow person-affecting view. Furthermore, there is then also no reason to worry – as the call for opinion pieces for this volume does – whether "the NIP logic [is] misleading if carried over directly to climate change."¹⁰

Jonathan M. Hoffmann is writing his PhD thesis at the University of Warwick on the design of institutions for the future. He is one of two guest editors of this IGJR issue.

Notes

1 Where not mentioned otherwise, references are made to Parfit, D. (2010) [1983]: *Energy Policy and the Further Future. The Identity Problem*. In: Gardiner, S. M. et al. (eds.): *Climate Ethics: Essential Readings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 112-121.

2 Parfit, D. (1984): *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, ch. 18.

3 He assumes that the boy's life is worth living.

4 Parfit 1984, 364-366 (see footnote 2).

5 Reiman, J. (2007): *Being fair to future people: the non-identity problem in the original position*. In: *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 35 (1), 69-92.

6 Rawls, J. (1971): *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press.

7 Heyward, C. (2008): *Can the all-affected principle include future persons? Green deliberative democracy and the non-identity problem*. In: *Environmental Politics*, 17 (4), 625-643.

8 Kumar, R. (2003): *Who can be wronged?* In: *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 31 (2), 99-118.

9 The approach supposedly also works with other currencies of justice, cf. Reiman (2007), 84 (see footnote 5).

10 I'd like to thank Charlotte Unruh, Michael Rose and Simon Caney for valuable comments on earlier drafts. All mistakes that remain are mine.