

On the Repugnance of the Repugnant Conclusion

by

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the plausibility of a certain position in the philosophical literature within which the Repugnant Conclusion is treated, not as repugnant, but as an acceptable implication of the total welfare principle. I will confine myself to focus primarily on Törbjörn Tännsjö's presentation. First, I reconstruct Tännsjö's view concerning the repugnance of the RC in two arguments. The first argument is criticized for (a) addressing the wrong comparison, (b) relying on the controversial claim that the privileged people in our actual world only have lives barely worth living and (c) that Tännsjö's identification between Z-lives and privileged lives is restricted to certain versions of the notion 'barely worth living' – a restriction that weakens the force of the argument. The second argument is criticized because some of its premises entailed (b) and (d) for its implausible claim that non-imaginable outcomes cannot be compared.

Keywords: ethics, population theory, Tännsjö, The Repugnant Conclusion, utilitarianism

*Oh, think twice, for you and me
this is just another day in paradise.*

Phil Collins

1. Introduction

LET US ACCEPT that utilitarianism is the normative moral theory that tells us to maximise welfare. The theory can be broken down into at least two components:

Consequentialism The right act is the act which promotes the best outcome.

The total welfare principle The best outcome is the one with the greatest total sum of welfare value.

In this paper I shall discuss a well-known objection to the total welfare principle. Namely, that it implies what Derek Parfit has called:

The Repugnant Conclusion

For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with very high quality of life [population A], there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though its members have lives that are barely worth living [population Z].¹

Parfit believes that the Repugnant Conclusion (RC) provides firm ground on which to resist the total welfare principle.²

The aim of this paper is more precisely to discuss the plausibility of a certain position in the philosophical literature within which the RC is treated, not as repugnant, but as acceptable. A position, that is, that allows us to think of the RC as posing no threat to the total welfare principle. This general strategy is pursued by several philosophers, for instance Richard Hare, John Mackie, Jesper Ryberg, and Torbjörn Tännsjö.³ In what follows I will focus primarily on Tännsjö's presentation. As far as I know, his work on this strategy is the most fully elaborated and the one that is most discussed in the literature.

In the next section I will, describe what I take to be Tännsjö's view in detail. I believe that Tännsjö's view best can be reconstructed as containing two arguments in stead of, as is common in the literature on the subject, only one argument. In sections 3-5 I will critically discuss some objections to Tännsjö's arguments and show why they are problematic. I will, for example, by introducing a distinction between different interpretations of a life barely worth living, show how Tännsjö cannot plausible claim, which is one of his most central premises, that the lives of privileged people can be identical with lives that are barely worth living.

2. Tännsjö's arguments

According to Parfit, a life in population Z could be drab or like a roller coaster.⁴ If drab, the people in Z would always be above the line where life is not worth living, but all the best things in life would be lost. Daily

¹ Parfit 1984 p. 388. I have added the brackets.

² Ibid. p. 390.

³ Hare 1993, Mackie 1985 p. 246, Ryberg 1996, Tännsjö 1991 pp. 42–43, 1992 p. 295, 1998 p. 161, 2002 pp. 345–46, 2004 p. 219.

⁴ Parfit 1984 p. 388.

life would consist of only potatoes and Muzak.⁵ Alternatively, a Z-life may be more like a *roller coaster* in which the ecstasies *just* outweigh the agonies.

No matter which of these interpretations of a Z-life one accepts, privileged people in e.g. Scandinavia could reason as follows: “Well, when we consider the ‘repugnant conclusion’ we believe that an enormous population of people all of whom have lives barely worth living is repugnant when compared to our very good lives. Population Z seems like a huge concentration camp with people living boring or manic-depressive lives, whereas our lives, though fewer in number, are very well worth living.”

As I see it, Tännsjö believes that this is the main reason why people find the RC repugnant.⁶ This belief needs to be backed by references to people who actually argue like this, but unfortunately Tännsjö does not provide us with this. However, let us accept that this is the reason why *some* have the intuition that the RC is repugnant. In order to question this kind of reasoning Tännsjö asks whether it is really so obvious that the lives of privileged people, are a lot better than barely worth living.

Tännsjö argues controversially that lives barely worth living are *not* very different from our privileged lives. By ‘privileged lives’ he means the lives of affluent people in developed countries — lives, one might even say, just like those enjoyed by most readers and writers of philosophical articles.⁷ Given this, Tännsjö believes that our intuition that the RC is repugnant evaporates. However, Tännsjö seems to give two arguments in favour of the claim that the RC is not repugnant. I believe the first, which we are already acquainted with can be fleshed out like this:

Tännsjö’s first argument

P1: If there is no difference between the lives of privileged people in our world and the lives of people in Z, then the repugnant conclusion is not repugnant.

P2: There is no difference between our lives and the lives in Z.

C1: Therefore, the repugnant conclusion is *not* repugnant.⁸

Before a critical discussion of the premises, let me first make two com-

⁵ Parfit 1986 p. 148.

⁶ Tännsjö 2002 p. 345, Tännsjö 2004 p. 223.

⁷ See e.g. Tännsjö 2002 p. 345–346.

⁸ Ibid. For a recent and similar view see also Ryberg 1996 pp. 143–144 and Ryberg 2004 p. 242.

ments about the conclusion and justify why Tännsjö needs another argument.

First, it seems clear to me that *Z* is not repugnant in itself. On face value, if people have lives worth living, it does not seem convincing to claim that such lives, *everything else being equal*, are repugnant in themselves. However, not all philosophers agree about this. Let me therefore, briefly and critically present a few proposals of why one can believe that *Z* is repugnant in itself. According to Fred Feldman, *Z* is repugnant in itself because people, qua being people, *deserve* a high level of welfare. In other words, it is repugnant that the people in *Z*, who deserves lives with high welfare, only live lives with very low welfare.⁹ However, as Gustaf Arrhenius has argued, Feldman's proposal suffers from severe problems. Let me, very roughly, mention one of these. When discussing the RC with its 'everything else being equal' clause, it does not seem appropriate to claim that we should be concerned with the desert level of each individual in *A* and *Z*. This *ceteris paribus* clause mentioned in the original formulation of RC can plausibly be interpreted to indicate that "the two compared populations are ... equally good in regard to other axiologically aspects apart from welfare [like e.g. desert]".¹⁰ If we accept this interpretation we can take for granted that the desert level in *A* and *Z* are the same, and the ranking of the two is therefore only determined by the total sum of welfare in each population.¹¹ Secondly, some could, because of aesthetic, snobbish or psychopathic reasons, believe that huge happy masses are repugnant. But such reasons should not guide the axiology of normative moral philosophy.

But most importantly, as Nils Holtug and Arrhenius has pointed out, the two *premises* of the argument do not say anything about the comparison of *A* and *Z*.¹² The premises only says something about the comparison of a life in *Z* and our lives. Tännsjö seems to be well aware of this

⁹ Feldman 1997 p. 194.

¹⁰ Arrhenius 2003a p. 8 (this reference is to the pdf version of the article, which is available on the authors homepage). The article is also published in *Utilitas* vol. 15 no. 2, July 2003.

¹¹ The 'critical level approach' endorsed by e.g. Blackerby, Bossert and Donaldson (see e.g. 1997) would also claim that *Z* is repugnant in itself. Repugnant, because people who have lives just worth living will, according to this view, fall below the critical level and lives below that level would only add negative value to an outcome. For a critical discussion of this view see Arrhenius 2000.

¹² Holtug 1998 and Arrhenius 2000 p. 49. In section 5, I will discuss this objection in more detail.

problem¹³, and he needs therefore another argument in order to show that the RC is not repugnant. I believe that the argument he gives us can be reconstructed like this:

Tännsjö's second argument

P3: If our lives are like Z-lives, we *cannot imagine* what a life in A would be like.¹⁴

P4: If we cannot imagine what a life in A is like, we will not be able to compare Z-lives with A-lives.

P5: If we cannot compare A with Z, and Z consist of positive value, one cannot claim that it is repugnant when a theory imply that Z is better than A.

C2: Therefore, one cannot claim that the RC is repugnant.

If we cannot imagine what a life in A would be like we should, according to Tännsjö, rely on the argument which says that Z is better because it is the outcome with the greatest total sum of welfare.¹⁵ Let us take a closer look at Tännsjö's arguments. In the next two sections I will examine Tännsjö's first argument, in section 5 the second argument.

3. Are our lives barely worth living?

In what follows I shall set out some reservations about Tännsjö's argumentation. First of all, I want, like several other philosophers, to question the plausibility of premise P2. Is it plausible to claim that the lives of privileged people have lives barely worth living?

In what follows, I will first discuss a usual response to P2. Secondly, by introducing a distinction between a local and a global interpretation of the notion 'a life barely worth living', I will try to show that Tännsjö cannot claim that the lives of privileged people are always best understood as lives that are only barely worth living.

The usual response, in the words of Holtug, is like this“ ... it seems to me that my life could be *significantly* worse than it actually is and yet worth living”.¹⁶ If this is true Tännsjö's argument is flawed.

¹³ Tännsjö 2002 p. 350.

¹⁴ Tännsjö 2002 p. 349, 2004 p. 226 and Ryberg/Tännsjö 2004 p. 4.

¹⁵ Tännsjö 2002 p. 355.

¹⁶ Holtug 1998.

It is, of course, very difficult to determine whether our lives would be worth living after a significant reduction in our welfare. I believe that most privileged people would be willing to allow that their lives can be significantly worsened and still be worth living. Imagine a privileged person who, through an accident, loses one arm. This new condition makes it very difficult for him to participate with pleasure in activities like golf and tennis, which contributed a good deal to his welfare before the accident. He therefore decides to stop playing golf and tennis. Suppose, furthermore, that though he has found he enjoys other activities (playing chess and darts), these, other things being equal, do not even come close to compensating him for the significant decrease in welfare caused by the loss of his right arm.

In this scenario it does not seem convincing to say that, because of the accident and the resulting decrease in welfare, this person's life will not be worth living.¹⁷ But this is what we would have to say if we accepted that a privileged person has a life that is barely worth living. For, presumably, if a person with a life barely worth living experiences a significant decrease in his overall level of welfare, his life will no longer be worth living.

Tännsjö does respond to such cases. He believes that they do not present a problem for his argument. He reports that in discussions with members of the Disabled People's Organisation, he always heard the following answer (one that supports his view):

When the accident had just occurred, I thought it was all over with me. I felt that my life had no meaning any longer. However, once I had adapted to the new situation, my life turned out to be no worse than it was before I acquired my disability. I live a different life now but not a worse life.¹⁸

It might be true that many people who become disabled through an accident recover to such an extent that — some time after the accident — they can honestly claim that their life as a disabled person is just as good as, or better than, the life they had before the accident. Indeed there seems to be solid empirical support for this view.¹⁹ But this may not be true in every case. Some disabled people may well insist, years after an accident,

¹⁷ For an objection like this, see Petersen 1999 pp. 96–97 and Rääkkä 2002 pp. 167–168.

¹⁸ Tännsjö 2002 p. 348.

¹⁹ See e.g. Brickman, Coates, and Janoff-Bulman 1978.

that their lives are significantly worse than they were before the disabling accident.

If we take mentally ill people instead of the physically disabled, we might get a different picture. For a year, I taught philosophy twice a week to mentally ill people at a day care centre. All of those I talked to claimed that therapy and medication made their lives with the mental illness worth living, even though they believed that their lives were significantly worse now than before the illness broke out. This kind of reasoning has been confirmed to me both by psychiatrists and the relatives of mentally ill people.

Perhaps the lives of privileged people are far better than we realise. It may be that we underestimate the value of the privileged lives we live. Whether this is true also depends, of course, on empirical investigation. But it does appear to be reasonable to hold the following: people who are now, for example, in prison or mentally ill are in a position to see more clearly that the life they had before was much better than they then realised – when they were not in prison or when they were not mentally ill. The fact that some of these people still believe that they have lives worth living, does also indicate that we should be sceptical to accept premise P2 in Tännsjö's first argument.

To point out more clearly my second worry with Tännsjö's P2, let me introduce a distinction between two interpretations of a life barely worth living.

Global Interpretation (GI) A life barely worth living is a life in which the *sum* of welfare in the life, taken as a whole, just sneaks above a neutral life.

Local Interpretation (LI) A life barely worth living is a life in which *each day* is at a level barely worth living, so that the *sum* of welfare in such a life may be much greater than a neutral life.

In combination with the total welfare principle, both interpretations imply that the best outcome is Z since the sum of welfare is larger in Z than it is in A. (Proportionally, the difference between A and Z is the same whether or not we adopt GI or LI.)

Note furthermore, that the RC implied by LI is less repugnant than the one implied by GI. For the lives in Z, according to the LI, are much better

than lives in Z which we can identify according to GI.²⁰ In the life of an individual in LI each day is just above the point where life ceases to be worth living. Taken as a whole such a life will contain substantial total welfare. In GI a life can look very different according to how the welfare is distributed across a whole life. It could e.g. be a very drab life that was mainly neutral, but that at least once in that lifetime, an experience occurs that momentarily introduces sufficient positive value. Let me call such a version of a G-life, a ‘beep-life’ – since it contains only neutral value besides one positive moment (beep) of positive value.

It is, however, important to distinguish between the two interpretations, as Tännsjö’s strategy to undermine the claim that the RC is repugnant does not always work if we adopt GI. The problem with adopting GI is that it, at least in some instances (like e.g. a beep-life), does not fit Tännsjö’s view of a privileged life in the actual world. We would probably not say that privileged lives are in any sense like beep-lives. So, even if Tännsjö believe that the lives of privileged people is much like Z-lives, this cannot always be true.²¹ And this shows us that the scope of his strategy is restricted to certain versions of the notion ‘barely worth living’. A restriction that Tännsjö does not even seem to recognize.

4. The objection from comparability

Both Holtug and Arrhenius have claimed that what is primarily repugnant about the RC is connected with the *difference* between A and Z.²² In their view, the repugnance of the RC cannot be explained away by focusing on the comparison between Z and the present welfare of actual privileged people.²³ And this is exactly what the first argument does.

Holtug and Arrhenius’ diagnosis is on target when they emphasise that it is possible to think that the RC is repugnant regardless of how the lives in Z (or A) compare with our lives. But Arrhenius is ready to accept, that

²⁰ Tännsjö 1992 seems to be implicitly aware of the distinction between LI and the GI when he says, “After all, my pessimism is compatible with the possibility that, by living a long life we may be able to realise a good deal of value” p. 295.

²¹ Tännsjö view would work better if the G-lives represented kinds of roller coaster lives, as these lives, at least more than beep-lives, would be more like ‘normal privileged lives’.

²² Arrhenius 2000 pp. 49–50, Holtug 1998.

²³ Ibid.

even if our lives are like Z-lives, the difference between A and Z points in the direction that A is better than Z. Arrhenius attempt to make this clear by restating the RC:

Let's assume that Tännsjö et al. are right and that the current world population consists of people with very low positive welfare. Which of the following two futures would be the best? In the first scenario we have a massive expansion of the population size but all the people still have very low welfare [population Z]. In the second scenario, the population size remains the same but we have a major increase in people's welfare such that everybody enjoys very high welfare [population A]. The answer seems obvious.²⁴

Contrary to Arrhenius's opinion, is not obvious to me (and Tännsjö) that it would be right in the above-mentioned situation to chose the second scenario. Is it so obvious that it would not be better with a more extensive population - with more people like you and I – instead of a smaller population with people having extremely good lives?

Let me try to argue for my point by using an analogy in which you have a choice between increasing the welfare of your father or bringing a new child into existence. Assume, that your father have a life with low welfare and, for the sake of the argument, assume furthermore that your father, like you, even though has a privileged life. On the basis of the situation you will now have the following choice: Either you can increase the welfare of your father by giving him a drug that would make him very happy, say for another 50 years (e.g. from 70 to the age of 120) or you can bring a new child (your child) into existence who will get a privileged life like you and your father. I know that I hint at intuitions, but I have tried to show that it is not obvious that it is better to drug my father than having a child. If this is true, it is not obvious that we should choose a major increase in the current world population instead of increasing the population size and thereby bring more people with privileged lives into existence.

5. The A-people problem

I turn now to objections to Tännsjö's second argument. If it is true that a privileged life just sneaks above neutrality and that a life of very high welfare is far above the welfare of privileged people, we will face what

²⁴ Arrhenius 2000 p. 49. I have inserted the brackets.

we can call the ‘A-people problem’. The A-people problem exists if we believe that we cannot imagine a life lived in A that is, say, 10 times better than a privileged person in our world and because it is fair to claim that such lives are not possible at all. If we cannot imagine such a life – *a fortiori* if such lives are impossible – the force of the RC evaporates. Z, which contains positive welfare, is better than a population that is not possible. This is the upshot of Tännsjö’s second argument.

To begin with we should note that Tännsjö’s second argument (e.g. P3), rests on the controversial claim that the lives in Z are like our lives. If it is conceded that we should be sceptical towards embracing this claim, then both of Tännsjö’s argument does not rest on firm ground. I mean, if it, in opposition to Tännsjö, is believed that the lives in A are like our privileged lives, then we will have a correspondent ‘Z-people problem’, in the sense that lives that are ten times worse than ours are not possible either. If this were our belief it would be vacuously true that A is better than Z. So this argument against the repugnance on the RC is, once again, a non-starter if our privileged lives are not like Z-lives. But there are additional problems with the second argument. The argument does a poor job in answering the objection from comparability. Although, the second argument, contrary to the first argument, mentions the comparison between A and Z, the mere possibility of the comparison is explained away by the premise that we, if our lives are like the one in Z, cannot imagine what a life in A would be like.

Furthermore, I agree with Arrhenius when he rejects the kind of reasoning used in the second argument by claiming “... it seems incredible that there are no logically possible lives with very high welfare (recall that Tännsjö thinks that ‘mere logical possibilities’ are relevant)”.²⁵ So, let us accept that even if we cannot imagine such lives or believe that they are impossible, mere logical possibilities can be used as test cases for moral principles. This is a common and established practice within moral philosophy, recall Rawls’ use of ‘the veil of ignorance.’

6. Conclusion and perspective

In this paper my aim has (i) been to reconstruct Tännsjö’s view concern-

²⁵ Ibid.

ing the repugnance of the RC in two arguments and (ii) to question the soundness of these arguments. The first argument was criticized for (a) addressing the wrong comparison, (b) relying on the controversial claim that the privileged people in our actual world only have lives barely worth living and (c) that Tännsjö's identification between Z-lives and privileged lives is restricted to certain versions of the notion 'barely worth living' – a restriction that weakens the force of the argument. The second argument was criticized because some of its premises entailed (b) and (d) for its implausible claim that non-imaginable outcomes cannot be compared.

But even if one believe that it is not repugnant that the total welfare principle implies RC, this does of course not prove the principle. Since Parfit began to discuss RC, there has been many suggestions on alternative versions of the RC. And some of them versions that seem even more repugnant than the original version.²⁶ But the focus in this paper has been with the original formulation of RC and with Tännsjö and Co's response to this objection.

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²⁶ See e.g. Arrhenius 2003b and Mulgan 2002

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