Comparative personal views and the non-identity problem

by Jonas Harney

The non-identity problem (NIP) is a severe problem for the ethics of future people: Today's acts can influence the identity of future people.[1] If so, the common moral reasoning that we ought to avoid making people worse off and, thus, harming them fails with respect to these future people. The NIP is not a problem for all moral theories. But it is highly pertinent for all moral theories that adopt, or partly incorporate, a

> *Comparative Personal View*
>
> The moral status of an act *A* necessarily depends on the comparative relation between a property *F* of some person *P* as a consequence of *A* and *F* of *P* as a consequence of the relevant alternative(s).

Comparative Personal Views compare a particular person's property as a result of one action with the property of the very same person as a result of the alternatives. Therefore, they are subject to the NIP: If an act affects who will exist in the future, some particular person *P* who would exist as a consequence of that act would not exist in the relevant alternative(s). And since a property cannot exist without the bearer of the property, there is no property *F* of *P* as a consequence of the relevant alternative(s) that the property *F* of *P* as a consequence of *A* could be compared with.[2] Thus, Comparative Personal Views do not produce any wrong-making features with respect to non-identical future persons. They do not apply to (the parts of) actions that influence the identity of future people.

How serious is the problem? Melinda Roberts and Jörg Tremmel argue that it is small, because the effect on the identities of future people is rather insignificant: the existence of virtually every person is highly precarious given all the causal influence that contribute to a particular person coming into existence. Melinda Roberts argues from this that for most acts there would be a chance that some person exists in some alternative that is accessible to the agent.[3] Therefore, we would need to take into account the very small chances that particular persons exist in an alternative anyway and assess the acts on basis of expected comparisons of people's *F*-extents. Jörg Tremmel, by contrast, insists that many acts would play just one very small causal role leading to the existence of a particular person. Given the insignificant causal influence of a particular act on the existence of people, we could justifiably ignore the very small chances for a particular person coming into existence as a consequence of a particular act.[4] If successful, both reasonings would massively reduce the scope of the NIP. It would not be a serious, or real-world problem, then.

However, these counterarguments overlook the specific characteristics of Comparative Personal Views. First, the very small chances of each particular person coming into existence exponentiate, because for a particular person's property to be compared, the person needs to exist as a consequence of the act *and* as a consequence of at least one alternative. And the chance that a person would exist as a consequence of two acts is the product of both these very small chances. Hence, if each particular act causes a particular person to exist with only very small chances, the chances that this very person would exist as a consequence of an act *and* as a consequence of the alternative that is available to the agent are astronomically small. But even if it were true for each act that some people could exist independently of choosing this act, (many) other people's identities would still be influenced by each particular act. Insisting here that this kind of influence is negligible does not help either. For such a move just amounts to a rejection of Comparative Personal Views: the status of an act would not depend on the relation between *P*'s *F* as a consequence of *A* and *P*'s *F* as a consequence of the relevant alternative anymore. Hence, the NIP is still a problem for Comparative Personal Views. They fail to take into account the morally relevant properties of those people whose identities are nevertheless altered by an act and, thus, disregard the moral significance of the properties of still quite many future people.

Second, Comparative Personal Views compare the relevant alternative courses of action that are available to the agent. Causal factors *previous* to a particular act do not reduce the morally relevant causal effect of that act on the existence of particular individuals. They are

irrelevant because they bear on the consequences of all available alternatives likewise. Hence, an act influences whether a person exists or not independently of previous causal dependencies. *Subsequent* causal factors may additionally alter the identity of future people, though. But they do not countervail the causal effect of an act on the identities. Subsequent causal factors would rather further extend the range of possible people. If so, the particular act still determines *the set of possible people* from which one particular person then comes into existence as a consequence of the subsequent causal factors. And if the set of possible people determined by an act and the set of possible people determined by the act's alternative are disjunct, there is no person who could have existed as a consequence of the act *and* as a consequence of the alternative act. Thus, a person's existence still hinges on that very act.

Robert's and Tremmel's attempts to diminish the practical significance of the NIP fail. Tremmel's alleged counterargument even highlights the severity of the problem: many events influence the particular identities of future people. Hence, virtually every act can have tremendous effects on the existence of future people; not just acts that are large in scale such as Parfit's depletion example[5] or his energy policy example.[6]

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Notes

1 I use "people" and "persons" interchangeably.

2 Some philosophers try to avoid this by comparing *F* of a person *P* who exists as a consequence of the act with *F* of some *other* person S who exists as a consequence of the alternative, see Hare, C. (2007): Voices from Another World: Must We Respect the Interests of People Who Do Not, and Will Never, Exist? In: Ethics, 117 (3), 498–523; Meacham, C. 2012: Person-Affecting Views and Saturating Counterpart Relations. In: Philosophical Studies, 158 (2), 257–287). These solutions deviate from Comparative Personal Views, though, since Comparative Personal Views compare the extents of *F* of *the very same person*.

3 Roberts, Melinda A. (2007): The Non-Identity Fallacy: Harm, Probability and Another Look at Parfit's Depletion Example. In: Utilitas, 19 (3), 267–311.

4 Tremmel, J. (2018): Fact-insensitive thought experiments in climate ethics – Exemplified by Parfit's non-identity problem. In: Jafry, T. (ed.): The Routledge Handbook of Climate Justice. London: Routledge, 42-56, here 44-52.

5 Parfit, D. (1984): Reasons and Persons. Oxford: Claredon Press, here 361-362.

6 Parfit, D. (2010): 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, here 112.