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We Are All in this Life Together

Many people find themselves ruminating on the existence of others, and wishing that they had not been born. This may come about innocently enough, when one is stuck in traffic and laments that there are so many other drivers on the road to where one is intending to go, making it so much harder to get to one's destination; or faced by the natural regret that there are so many other people eager to buy a house in one's favourite city, hence causing house prices to sky-rocket beyond one's budget. Such thoughts are typically rather frivolous, but they will serve us in order to examine the more troublesome examples. Similar thoughts often exist in more ominous form, when people wish that whole groups had not been born or, at least, had not been in one's vicinity: the poor or the rich, immigrants or locals, people of a certain ethnicity or religion or, more understandably, citizens of nations who are at war with one's own, racists and bigots, or dangerous criminals. These thoughts may concern current people, past ones, or both. Let us call such thoughts "preferences for others' nonexistence" (henceforth PON). For our purposes, existing and being born will be identical. PON do not include the also not unfamiliar preferences that others currently alive should die, and are concerned only with the having-been-born of others. We are also not concerned with cases where one wishes another person not to have been born out of compassion for that person, with a view to her interests (e.g., someone who is born into a life of great unavoidable suffering).

Such PON are often morally disturbing even when we limit ourselves to mere wishes with no implications in practice, and understand that the imagined scenario does not involve anyone's death, but merely that the persons under consideration had not been born. Cursing the very existence of law-abiding groups (ethnic, racial, religious, etc.) within one's society, for example, is hardly an indication of virtue.¹

¹ There are complex limitations on the moral acceptability of wishing that others had not been born, both *de re* and *de dicto*, which needn't concern us here.

What has not been noticed, as far as I know, is that *by and large this whole category of thoughts does not make sense* or, at least, involves a heavy price: the likely not coming into existence of oneself and all whom one cares about. We are assuming that one is happy to have been born, and likewise is happy about the existence of some other people one cares about. The Nonidentity Problem (henceforth NIP) or effect has been disturbing philosophers for over a generation (the classic here is Parfit 1984; concerning history see, e.g., Kahane 2017). Broadly, the NIP is concerned with the relationship between good or bad actions or states of affairs, and who comes to be born as a result. Much of its philosophical bite has been disturbing or even outright negative. Concerning the past, Robert Merrihew Adams has argued that the NIP or effect threatens love (Adams 2009; cf. Metz 2009). I have argued that one implication of the NIP is that in one sense morally everyone ought to regret his or her existence (Smilansky 2013).²

I show that, surprisingly, the NIP has another powerful implication, which has not been explicitly noted, and that I find largely *positive*: *it rationally excludes most preferences for the non-existence of others* (particularly of groups), or at least requires a heavy price from those holding such preferences.³ Due to the NIP, many other people (in ways to be specified) are typically the condition for the coming into existence of ourselves and of all those about whom we care.

The relevant preference in the PON can be understood as “*I wish (some) others did not exist because this would benefit me (or those I care about), all considered.*” But that preference is irrational, given that one is happy that oneself and those one cares about have been born, and given the NIP. In this sense, PON are typically self-defeating. Whether we like it or not, we are all in this life together.

² For further depressing consequences, see Smilansky 2016; Smilansky 2019a; Smilansky 2019b.

³ I am framing the discussion in terms of preferences, i.e., as a wish that certain people had not been born. It could also be framed as a claim or thought or belief that “it would have been better (e.g., for me) had X not been born.” Both kinds of evaluations (wishes and beliefs) can be described as irrational, but the latter has an advantage in that belief claims can be described as false. I find it more natural to view the common phenomenology here as operating in terms of preferences, but my argument can work under either description.

The Nonidentity Problem

Our having been born was against all odds; change things a little bit and we do not happen. Minor changes would have been sufficient to prevent our parents from having met; or even if they had met and had had children, this would have resulted in their having had children at different times – children that would not have been us. The breakage in the causal chain leading to one's birth could, of course, have occurred much earlier: a minor distraction preventing or delaying the meeting and copulation of either pair of one's grandparents, or one's great-grandparents, or one's great-great-grandparents, or any other previous ancestor, would have been sufficient to preclude one's existence.

But this “fragility” of having come into existence means that there is very little leeway. Mass immigration, rises or falls in the population due to natural or person-made causes, sociological changes in attitudes to procreation, such are exactly the sort of occurrences that, almost beyond a doubt, would have been effective enough to prevent the birth of our ancestors or, directly, of ourselves. The argument depends on historical contingencies and, in this way it is, in part, empirical. There is no logical contradiction in my existing within a historical scenario that excludes large historical events affecting my group (surely God could have created me irrespective of the activities or indeed existence of my ancestors). And even empirically, there *might* be individuals alive today to whom the argument does not apply. But in accordance with the way in which the world works, it is not possible for us to exist without the past unfolding pretty much as it did. Without those events, our parents/grandparents/great-grandparents ... would not have procreated when they did, and hence we would not have existed. The causal conditions realistically required for our existence would have been prevented: the actual chain of events that brought us into existence would have been precluded, and an alternative path was not available.

Our focus here is on the people co-existing with us. Let us return to the driver ruminating while stuck in the traffic. Again, we are assuming that he is happy, all considered, that he and his loved ones exist.⁴ Given this reasonable

⁴ Can I coherently think that, *for me*, never to have existed would have been bad? If no one exists, there is no one for whom it is bad not to exist. But once I do exist, asking myself prudentially whether I wish not to have been born does make sense. For one who has lived a life of harsh and prolonged suffering unredeemed by any

assumption and the fragility of coming into existence, what limitations does this pose to his PON? It is highly unlikely that his existence and that of his loved ones depends on *every one* of the drivers unfortunately ahead of him. Yet in most cases one could not be certain. The “butterfly” effect may be operating, and that old man hugging the left lane and making bad traffic even worse, might be a part of the necessary causal chain leading to our ruminator’s birth. It might suffice, for example, that had this person not existed someone else would have driven his own car more quickly, many years ago, and thereby not delayed the bus whose delay actually enabled the ruminator’s parents to have met at the bus stop.⁵

But it suffices for my argument that more general, collective scenarios be envisaged. The ruminating driver can “afford” to “give up” some of the individual drivers although, again, he could not typically be sure which ones. However, he cannot “give up” on the mass of people with whom he is sharing the rush-hour. If we think of them as a group, then they are almost certainly necessary for his existence. Without this group of people, he himself and most people he cares about would almost certainly not have come into existence. Given the fragility of our coming into existence, and everything else held equal, he cannot, as we saw, rationally wish that such groups had not existed, because then his own existence and that of those he cares about would have, with near certainty, not come about. Wishing them away does not make sense, unless one is willing to pay the ultimate price. He should, in fact, be *thankful* that they exist (although he can still regret that they had not decided to stay at home on this particular day).

The drivers on the road with us on a given day are an artificial category, but many groups are, importantly, more stable in our minds. Yet the same logic will, as a rule, apply to them as well; and indeed even more clearly. People having such PON cannot “give up” whole categories (blacks, Jews, bigots, republicans, democrats, or whatever), however much they would wish that people of those categories had not been born. For, we recall, such massive differences would have almost certainly interrupted things and precluded

good, to be sorry to exist seems perfectly reasonable. Arguably, one may wish not to have been born, even if one believes that one’s life is worth living (Smilansky 2007). The underlying assumption here is that we can relevantly compare existence and non-existence, which suffices for my purposes.

⁵ The parents of a friend of mine met while waiting for a bus.

the existence of those holding the PON. There is something radically open, inclusive, and egalitarian about this conclusion, which supports a surprising kind of *reluctant solidarity* with humanity, even our enemies. One cannot “wish away” even the idiots, racists, or bigots. We share a boat and, while some of the company may not be to our liking, sharing the boat is a condition for the existence of ourselves and our loved ones.

My claim that this new philosophical result is happily positive should not be overblown. The fact that the NIP excludes such PON thoughts does not really have anything to do with what makes these sort of PON non-virtues, often vicious, and worthy of condemnation.⁶ Moreover, because the problem emerges from the fragility of our existence, to the extent that negative PON are excluded, so would many seemingly virtuous wishes about how the world could have been (wishing from compassion that those who were born into a life of suffering would not have been born; wishing that certain populations were bigger than they are; wishing that murderous and evil people were not born). Nevertheless, because of the widespread prevalence and ethical and social importance of thoughts wishing that others had not been born, the conclusion that most such preferences (and in particular preferences for the non-existence of large, widely hated social groups) can typically be shown to be *irrational*, is significant.⁷ The charge of irrationality might not, of course, be sufficient to convince all bigots and their kind to cease having or expressing their malevolent desires that people from other groups (or indeed whole groups) had not been born, yet nevertheless it seems to be both surprising and significant.

Of course, age matters too. If one is eighty, then one’s existence clearly preceded the existence of most people alive today. In terms of our topic, most people even in one’s own society are then what we can call *Irrelevants*; those people’s not having been born could not have prevented one’s own coming to be. If the existential ruminating driver is eighty, then he may wish nearly all other drivers away with personal impunity. Yet for this counter-argument to

⁶ An example of a robust moral claim in a similar context is Setiya (2014), who argues for a duty of *agape*.

⁷ Moreover, if people realize that wishing that their neighbours never existed means that they and the people they care about probably would not exist either, this may lead some people to wish instead that their neighbours would die. That avoids the non-identity problems incurred by wishing for their not having been born, but is probably a meaner wish.

work, it has to be extreme: he cannot have children, let alone grandchildren, and his friendships and indeed most kinds of cherished relationships, even professional ones, would need to be largely limited to octogenarians and upwards. This is not much of a limitation on my argument. So, indeed, in some sense the younger you are, the more vulnerable you become to my argument, but if you care deeply about any younger people, then you too fall into the trap. *Rationally, most people cannot safely engage in thoughts of the form of large-scale PON.*

There is always the possibility of biting the bullet and opting for the (counterfactual) not having been born of a certain group. A fanatical racist may understand that his existence depends on the existence of blacks or Jews who were around at the time of his birth (or before). He can, nevertheless, say that he prefers that all those people would not have been born, even if this implies that he and others he cares about would not have come to be born as a result.

This might well be the correct (albeit theoretically highly demanding) attitude one morally ought to take in certain extreme cases. Arguably we should morally prefer that Hitler had been assassinated in 1937, even though that would have changed history and thereby prevented the existence of ourselves and our loved ones (and several other billion people; albeit others would have been born instead) (see Smilansky 2013). But our focus here is on the scenario where one (quite legitimately, we assume) prefers one's own existence, but also prefers that many of one's contemporaries were absent. My point is that, in this sort of case, one cannot rationally wish those relevant others' non-existence.

It might be challenged whether indeed, even if it is true that my existence depends on the existence of others, it is irrational to wish that (1) those others didn't exist and (2) that I did exist. This could be understood in two ways. The first would be what we might call the 'meta-regret' that we need to 'choose,' and cannot come into existence without the realistically actual conditions for our existence (e.g., Thompson 2000). This can be acknowledged, but does not threaten my point, for we are interested not in mere fanciful wishing but in preferences grounded in what really is the causal case.

It might be counter-argued that this dismisses the challenge too quickly, and disconnects us too much from the nature of wishes. We wish for highly improbable events all the time; "beating the odds" is what many wishes are all about. So why cannot the frustrated driver wish that the thousands of

rush-hour drivers ahead of her had not existed, but that the changes that made this the case did not lead to her own consequent non-existence, however unlikely they rendered it? Cannot she coherently wish to have come into existence against the odds in these altered circumstances? Likewise with the more important examples of wishing that whole, e.g., ethnic groups which one dislikes had not been born, but without blocking one's own coming to be. Indeed such radically-against-the-odds wishing is possible. But, the nature of the wish in our context makes those wishing it vulnerable to my challenge. Those expressing such wishes would be *disappointed* by the as-a-rule dependence on all those other people and see it as effectively blocking the rationality of actually wishing that others did not exist.

The second interpretation would disclaim that it is irrational to wish that two causally incompatible facts were true. It would be irrational to prevent the existence of others if I have as an end my own existence (and their existence is a necessary means to mine). But in wishing others did not exist we are not preventing our own existence, we are not trying to bring about our own existence, and we are not even trying to undo others' existence (whatever that would involve). As long as I am not in the business of making certain things happen, why should wishing that X occurred commit me to wishing the consequences of X? But this implausibly denies the very possibility for asking about the rationality of preferences in our context, and merely avoids the dilemma. Assume that I have a disabled child, and he could have been born disabled or not born at all, and I am seriously engaging in reflection concerning my regret or affirmation of the all considered state of affairs (e.g., McMahan 2005; Wallace 2013). It is not a serious response in such a context to deny the irrationality of the preference for having this child not disabled; this preference is, realistically, impossible, and to insist on it merely avoids the very predicament.

Finally, it could be argued that I am confusing between the case in which the existence of another is a part of the causal chain leading to my own existence, and a case in which the existence of another is itself merely an effect of something that is a part of the causal chain leading to my own existence. Presumably, wishing that World War I had not occurred amounts to wishing my own non-existence, because had the war not occurred many things necessary for my existence would have unfolded differently, so that I would not have come to exist. It might be thought that the cases I am discussing are different; e.g., that the existence of the people in the traffic

jam with me is not a cause or condition of my existence. My existence and that of those people are merely unrelated “symptoms” of the same historical causes. We have here merely a backtracking counterfactual – if they had not existed, this must have been because some past event had not occurred, and that past event lies on the causal chain leading to my own existence.

However, this “symptomatic” conjunction is not what, I claim, typically pertains in cases of the NIP such as I am discussing. The non-existence of mass numbers of people (such as whole social groups in my society) would have *affected* the conditions which were causally required for my coming into existence. The coming together of my parents, at the exact time and under the exact temperature conditions (and so forth) that were required for my being conceived, would have in fact been excluded. By analogy, it is irrational (in the constrained, realistic sense we are interested in) to wish to have had elder siblings, at least ones known to be siblings and living with one’s parents. Such siblings would have unavoidably changed the extremely fragile circumstances in which one came to be conceived. Those elder siblings might well have had a younger brother or sister, but this would not have been you. The large social groups in my argument are similar to siblings, in this strong, causal sense; indeed, this is my very claim, that we are all (or nearly all) “brothers and sisters” in this causal sense; leading to the incoherence of group PON.

The Nonidentity problem, based upon the fragility of the situations in which people come to be born, by and large excludes a typical class of preferences that other people (usually groups of people) had not existed; which include beliefs that we would have been better off had they not existed. When closely examined, we see that without those “undesirable” people, we and those we care about would also not have come to be born. The self is held hostage by the other. We come to exist together, or not at all.⁸

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