

## A Dissolution of the Repugnant Conclusion

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**ABSTRACT** *This article articulates and defends a dissolution of the so-called repugnant conclusion, which focuses on the notion of life worth living figuring both in Parfit's formulation of the repugnant conclusion and in most responses to such a conclusion. The proposed dissolution demonstrates that the notion of life worth living is plagued by multiple ambiguities and that these ambiguities, in turn, hamper meaningful debate about both the issue of whether the repugnant conclusion can be avoided and the issue of whether the repugnant conclusion is actually repugnant. This result does not exclude that some modified versions of the repugnant conclusion may yield valuable insights about the value of populations and the tenability of different axiological/ethical theories. Still, if the proposed dissolution is correct, then the repugnant conclusion rests on an ill-defined notion and we lack the information required to assess the merits of the repugnant conclusion.*

### 1. Introduction

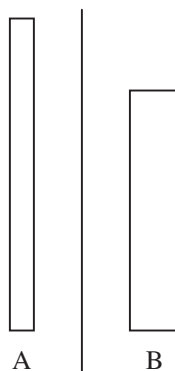
In a series of highly influential works, Derek Parfit argued that axiological and ethical theories which allow that any loss in the quality of lives in a population can be outweighed by a sufficient gain in the quantity of lives imply what he calls the *repugnant conclusion* (henceforth RC): 'compared with the existence of very many people [...] all of whom have a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger number of people whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better, even though these people would have lives that are barely *worth living*'.<sup>1</sup> Parfit's formulation of the RC has sparked intense debates in axiology and population ethics, and several responses to the RC have been put forward in the specialized literature.<sup>2</sup> In this article, I articulate and defend a dissolution of the RC, which focuses on the notion of *life worth living* (henceforth LWL) figuring both in Parfit's formulation of the RC and in most responses to the RC. This dissolution holds not simply that those who debate about the RC speak of 'LWL' in dissimilar senses or that it is difficult to ground reliable judgments about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living.<sup>3</sup> Rather, the proposed dissolution demonstrates that the notion of LWL *itself* is plagued by multiple ambiguities and that these ambiguities, in turn, hamper meaningful debate about both the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant.

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 outlines Parfit's formulation of the RC and elucidates the main assumptions on which both this formulation of the RC and most responses to the RC rest. Section 3 outlines the proposed dissolution of the RC, which highlights the multiple ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL and illustrates how these ambiguities hamper meaningful debate about both the issue of

whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant. Section 4 defends the proposed dissolution of the RC against a series of objections and explicates the implications of such a dissolution for the ongoing debate concerning the RC.

Before proceeding, the following two preliminary remarks are in order. First, this article speaks of *dissolving* the RC to indicate not only that those who debate about the RC rely on dissimilar characterizations of the notion of LWL or disagree on how one should interpret the RC, but also – and more radically – that the RC rests on an ill-defined notion and that those who debate about the RC lack the information required to assess the merits of the RC. The challenge posed by the proposed dissolution can be explicated as follows. Parfit’s formulation of the RC rests on an ill-defined notion of LWL, which prevents those who debate about the RC from determining whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant. This result does not exclude that some modified versions of the RC may yield valuable insights about the value of populations and the tenability of different axiological/ethical theories (Section 4). Still, if the proposed dissolution is correct, then those who debate about the RC lack the information required to assess the merits of the RC. Moreover, as I argue in Sections 3 and 4, there are reasons to doubt the prospects of the ongoing attempts to resolve or circumvent the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL figuring in the RC. As a result, it remains dubious that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC.<sup>4</sup>

Second, the dissolution articulated and defended in this article targets the ambiguities inherent in *the notion of LWL* figuring in the RC rather than the putative unreliability of *people’s intuitions* concerning the RC. In this respect, the proposed dissolution sharply differs from other influential contributions to the ongoing debate about the RC which target the putative unreliability of people’s intuitions concerning the RC.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, in recent years a few authors have noted that ‘it may not be clear what we mean by “a life worth living”’ and that, due to this lack of clarity, ‘we might be unable to evaluate the [RC]’.<sup>6</sup> However, the proffered debates about the RC have not explicated in what respects exactly the notion of LWL is unclear and how exactly such unclarity hampers meaningful debate about the RC. The dissolution articulated and defended in this article aims to fill this significant lacuna in the literature.



**Figure 1.** Original figure appeared in Parfit, “Overpopulation,” 145

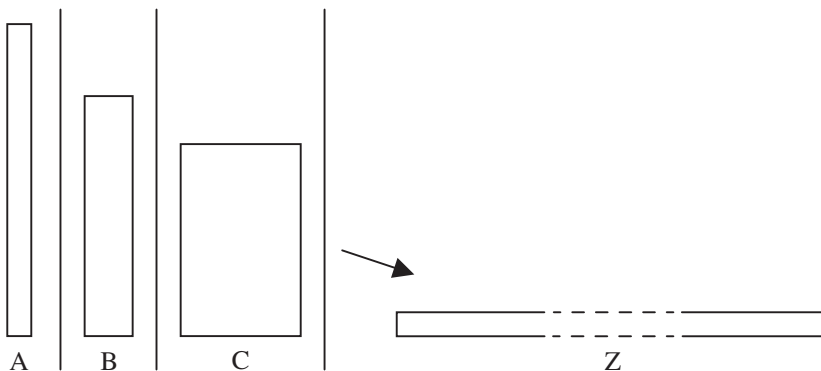
## 2. Parfit's Formulation of the RC

Parfit's formulation of the RC proceeds as follows. Consider the two populations in Figure 1, where each block represents a population, the width of each block represents the number of people living in this population, and the height of each block represents the quality of life of the people in such population.<sup>7</sup> By assumption, all individuals in a given population have the same quality of life and each individual's life is 'well worth living'.<sup>8</sup>

Now, compare the two populations A and B. By assumption, A includes very many people<sup>9</sup> all of whom have 'a very high quality of life'.<sup>10</sup> For its part, B includes twice as many people as A. The people in B have a lower quality of life than the people in A, but the individual lives of the people in B are more than half as much worth living compared with the individual lives of the people in A. Hence, B contains a greater quantity of 'whatever makes life worth living' than A.<sup>11</sup> Therefore – assuming that 'other things [being] equal, it is better if there is a greater total sum of [...] whatever makes life worth living'<sup>12</sup> – B is better than A. The idea is that 'it is good if any extra life is lived, that is worth living' and that the fact that in B there are 'more people living, all of whose lives would be worth living'<sup>13</sup> outweighs the fact that the people in B have a lower quality of life than the people in A.

Consider now the discrete sequence of populations in Figure 2, where again each block represents a population, the width of each block represents the number of people living in this population, and the height of each block represents the quality of life of the people in such population.<sup>14</sup> By assumption, all individuals in a given population have the same quality of life and each individual's life is 'worth living'.<sup>15</sup>

At each step in the sequence, the increase in population size supposedly compensates for the decrease in the quality of lives in the sense that each successive population contains a greater quantity of 'whatever makes life worth living' than the preceding one.<sup>16</sup> At the end of the sequence, we find Z, 'an enormous population' where there is 'the greatest quantity of whatever makes life worth living' and where all people 'have lives that are [barely] above the level where they would cease to be worth living'.<sup>17</sup> Therefore – assuming that 'other things [being] equal, it is better if there is a greater total



**Figure 2.** Original figure appeared in Parfit, "Overpopulation," 148

sum of [...] whatever makes life worth living'<sup>18</sup> – Z is better than A. However, Parfit holds that 'most of us believe that Z would be much worse than A'.<sup>19</sup> In fact, he regards the comparative claim that Z is better than A as 'intrinsically repugnant'.<sup>20</sup> The idea is that this comparative claim is *intuitively implausible* and/or *morally unacceptable* and that if some axiological or ethical theories entail such a comparative claim, then this fact is evidence that also those theories are intuitively implausible and/or morally unacceptable.<sup>21</sup>

Several responses to the RC have been put forward in the axiological and ethical literatures. Two sets of responses are especially prominent. On the one hand, several authors hold that *no* plausible axiology or population ethics *can avoid* the RC.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, several authors hold that the RC *can be avoided* and propose specific theories to demonstrate how one can avoid the RC. Among these theories, we find: superiority theories, which hold that in the sequence from population A to population Z 'the best things in life' are gradually lost and that this loss cannot be outweighed by any gain in the quantity of the goods/experiences available in population Z;<sup>23</sup> variable value theories, which hold that the more people already live in a population, the less adding a life of a given quality to this population contributes to the overall value of such population so that population A will be better than population Z irrespective of how many people live in population Z;<sup>24</sup> critical level theories, which hold that adding lives below a certain critical level of quality to a population fails to increase the value of this population even if such lives are worth living, and that whereas the lives in population A are above the critical level, the lives in population Z fall below this level;<sup>25</sup> incommensurability theories, which hold that in multiple points along the sequence from population A to population Z, adjacent populations are incommensurable in value, i.e. their values cannot be represented on the same scale, not even on the same ordinal scale;<sup>26</sup> parity theories, which hold that in some points along the sequence from population A to population Z, populations are on a par with their predecessors, where parity is a fourth way two populations can be compared beyond being better, worse, or equal to one another.<sup>27</sup>

Both Parfit's formulation of the RC and most responses to the RC rest on the following assumptions:

- (1) it is in principle possible to assess and compare the quality of individuals' lives in terms of cardinal *numerical measures*,<sup>28</sup>
- (2) the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are *worth living* is determined by how highly these lives fare in terms of *quality*. Above some levels of quality of life, lives are well worth living. Below some levels of quality of life, lives are not worth living. Between lives well worth living and lives not worth living, we find lives that are barely worth living, i.e. lives that include 'a minimal net surplus of [...] whatever makes life worth living',<sup>29</sup>
- (3) one can meaningfully compare the *overall value* of populations in terms of the quantity of whatever makes life worth living included in these populations. This overall value typically concerns how valuable populations are for the people in these populations,<sup>30</sup> but may also concern how valuable populations are in an agent-neutral sense<sup>31</sup> or in terms of axiological and ethical considerations that are at least partly distinct from how valuable these populations are for the people in such populations,<sup>32</sup>

- (4) the *betterness* relation is *transitive*, i.e. if each population in the sequence from A to Z is better than (or as good as) its immediate predecessor, then Z is better than (or as good as) A. To be sure, some authors hold that one can avoid the RC by denying that the betterness relation is transitive.<sup>33</sup> However, given the crucial role that transitivity plays in both practical and theoretical reasoning, most authors doubt that rejecting transitivity provides a plausible way to avoid the RC.<sup>34</sup>

In the next section, I articulate and defend a dissolution of the RC, which critically targets one implicit assumption of both Parfit's formulation of the RC and most proffered responses to the RC, namely the assumption that the notion of life worth living has a clear and well-defined meaning. As I argue in Sections 3 and 4, this assumption has not received adequate attention in the literature and does not withstand scrutiny.

### 3. A Dissolution of the Repugnant Conclusion

In this section, I articulate and defend a dissolution of the RC, which focuses on the notion of LWL figuring both in Parfit's formulation of the RC and in most responses to the RC. This dissolution holds not simply that those who debate about the RC speak of 'LWL' in dissimilar senses or that it is difficult to ground reliable judgments about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living.<sup>35</sup> Rather, the dissolution demonstrates that the notion of LWL *itself* is plagued by multiple ambiguities and that these ambiguities, in turn, hamper meaningful debate about both the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant. The dissolution proceeds as follows.

The notion of lives (barely) worth living figures centrally in Parfit's formulation of the RC.<sup>36</sup> Establishing whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant requires those who debate about the RC to specify what the claim that specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living *means* and determine *the extent* to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living.<sup>37</sup> However, widespread disagreements remain regarding both what the claim that specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living means<sup>38</sup> and the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL hinder the prospects of resolving these disagreements. Below I expand on three such ambiguities in turn, which respectively concern the demarcation of what *dimensions of worth* are tracked by the notion of LWL, the determination of *what weights* should be ascribed to each dimension of worth, and the specification of *what evaluative criteria* should ground LWL judgments. I then illustrate how these ambiguities hamper meaningful debate about both the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant.<sup>40</sup>

When debating about the meaning of the notion of LWL and the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living, most authors point to the presence of certain goods (or evils) and experiences in these lives.<sup>41</sup> The idea is that 'a life is worth living insofar as it has enough of the right sort of goods [and experiences] to outweigh the bad in it'.<sup>42</sup> Grounding reliable LWL judgments – i.e. reliable evaluative and classificatory judgments about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living – does not invariably require those who debate about the RC

to specify what goods (or evils) and experiences make people's lives worth (or not worth) living. For those who debate about the RC may be able to ground reliable LWL judgments about specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) without having to articulate a general theory of what goods (or evils) and experiences make people's lives worth (or not worth) living. Still, it is hard to see how those who debate about the RC may ground reliable LWL judgments unless they demarcate what *dimensions of worth* are tracked by the notion of LWL and determine *what weights* should be ascribed to each dimension of worth.<sup>43</sup> For LWL judgments can vary dramatically depending on what dimensions of worth are tracked by the notion of LWL and what weights are ascribed to each dimension of worth.<sup>44</sup> In fact, it remains unclear what the claim that specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living *means* unless those who debate about the RC demarcate what dimensions of worth are tracked by the notion of LWL and determine what weights should be ascribed to each dimension of worth. This, in turn, challenges those who debate about the RC to demarcate what dimensions of worth are tracked by the notion of LWL and determine what weights should be ascribed to each dimension of worth. Regrettably, the proffered debates about the RC have not addressed this definitional and evaluative challenge. This, in turn, hampers these debates' potential to shed light on the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant.

To illustrate this, consider the often-made claims concerning the extent to which 'ordinary lives' are worth living.<sup>45</sup> These claims have direct implications for the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant. For if 'many ordinary lives are worth not living [...] the Z world is perhaps not so bad [...] in comparison with the A world'<sup>46</sup> and the RC is 'perfectly acceptable'.<sup>47</sup> Regrettably, those who debate about the RC radically disagree about the extent to which ordinary lives are worth living. For instance, some hold that 'a life barely worth living is not a life that differs significantly from a normal privileged life'.<sup>48</sup> For their part, others hold that although a 'normal privileged life' is well worth living, 'there are hundreds of millions of [people in the actual world] whose life is barely worth living'.<sup>49</sup> Still differently, others hold that the claim that 'life in the actual world on average [is] just barely worth living [is] most implausible'.<sup>50</sup> These disagreements are problematic for those who debate about the RC. For such disagreements stem not only from disagreements concerning how well off particular people are or from the putative vagueness of expressions such as 'ordinary lives' or 'normal privileged lives', but also from the lack of specifications concerning what dimensions of worth are tracked by the notion of LWL and what weights should be ascribed to each dimension of worth.<sup>51</sup>

These definitional and evaluative concerns are exacerbated if one considers that demarcating what dimensions of worth are tracked by the notion of LWL and determining what weights should be ascribed to each dimension of worth may not suffice to ground reliable LWL judgments. For LWL judgments can vary remarkably depending on what *evaluative criteria* one endorses, and in many cases grounding reliable LWL judgments requires one to provide plausible and detailed specifications of what evaluative criteria should ground LWL judgments. To illustrate this, consider the often-made contrast between *subjectivist* evaluative criteria – according to which the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living *solely* depends on the involved persons' subjective judgments and attitudes toward their lives<sup>52</sup> – and *objectivist* evaluative criteria – according to which some goods (or evils) and experiences (e.g. autonomy, achievement, suffering) can make specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) worth (or not worth) living



irrespective of the involved persons' subjective judgments and attitudes toward their lives.<sup>53</sup> LWL judgments can vary remarkably depending on which of these criteria one endorses.<sup>54</sup> This, in turn, challenges one to provide plausible and detailed specifications of what evaluative criteria should ground LWL judgments. Regrettably, the proffered debates about the RC have not addressed this specification challenge. Moreover, as I illustrate in the next Section, there are reasons to doubt the prospects of these debates' attempts to address such challenge. This, in turn, hampers those debates' potential to shed light on the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant.

#### 4. Objections and Replies

In this section, I defend the proposed dissolution of the RC against a series of objections. These objections concede that there are multiple ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL figuring in the RC and that these ambiguities make it difficult to ground reliable LWL judgments, but hold that such ambiguities do not hamper meaningful debate about the RC, i.e. do not prevent those who debate about the RC from determining whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant. I shall consider in turn: the objection from *unnecessary judgments* (Section 4.1); the objection from *reliable judgments* (Section 4.2); the objection from *comparative judgments* (Section 4.3); the objection from *core cases* (Section 4.4); and the objection from *conceptual precisification* (Section 4.5).

##### 4.1. Objection from Unnecessary Judgments

The *objection from unnecessary judgments* holds that the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL do not hamper meaningful debate about the RC since those who debate about the RC can determine whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant without having to ground *any judgments* about the extent to which people's lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living. The idea is that despite the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL, those who debate about the RC can circumvent the need to ground any LWL judgments by using the expression 'LWL' as a *placeholder* and by *stipulating* that 'LWL' designates all and only those lives in which good things outweigh bad things with goodness defined by *whatever axiology* one endorses.<sup>55</sup>

There are at least two reasons to doubt that the objection from unnecessary judgments shows that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC. First, showing that meaningful debate about the RC can be grounded on a stipulated concept of LWL would require those who debate about the RC not only to *stipulate* a well-defined concept of LWL, but also to demonstrate that such concept *reliably tracks* the axiological facts that determine whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant. Regrettably, the proffered debates about the RC have not addressed this justificatory issue. And the alleged fact that many of those who debate about the RC use the expression 'LWL' as a placeholder falls short of indicating that 'LWL' reliably tracks the axiological facts that determine whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant. Second, it is *dubious* that a stipulated concept of LWL encompassing all and only those lives in which good things outweigh bad things with goodness defined by *whatever axiology* one endorses reliably tracks the axiological facts that determine whether the RC

can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant. For this stipulated concept may encompass rather dissimilar or even inconsistent sets of lives depending on what axiology one endorses. And relying on such stipulated concept would not allow those who debate about the RC to discriminate between inconsistent LWL judgments and account for the possibility that different authors may be mistaken in their LWL judgments. In fact, given that different authors often appear to make inconsistent LWL judgments (Section 3), it is dubious that any single coherent concept can encompass all and only those lives that different authors deem to be worth living.

A proponent of the objection from unnecessary judgments may object that those who debate about the RC do not have to rely on a single coherent concept that encompasses *all* and *only* those lives that different authors deem to be worth living. The idea would be that engaging in meaningful debate about the RC only requires those who debate about the RC to agree on *some* of the betterness comparisons entailed by the RC and that those who debate about the RC may agree on these betterness comparisons without having to rely on a single coherent concept of LWL. However, it is hard to see how those who debate about the RC may reach *substantive* agreement on the relevant betterness comparisons entailed by the RC unless they rely on a single coherent concept of LWL. For even if those who debate about the RC can reach *nominal* agreement on some of the betterness comparisons entailed by the RC without having to rely on a single coherent concept of LWL, such nominal agreement may be grounded on rather dissimilar or even inconsistent characterizations of the notion of LWL and may fail to reflect any substantive agreement between those who debate about the RC. Hence, pointing to the possibility that those who debate about the RC may reach nominal agreement on some of the betterness comparisons entailed by the RC without having to rely on a single coherent concept of LWL does not *per se* address the proposed dissolution's challenge that different authors' positions on the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant crucially depend on what characterizations of the notion of LWL are presupposed by such authors.

#### 4.2. Objection from Reliable Judgments

The *objection from reliable judgments* holds that the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL do not hamper meaningful debate about the RC since those who debate about the RC can determine whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant by grounding *reliable judgments* about the extent to which people's lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living. The idea is that despite the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL, those who debate about the RC can reliably assess the extent to which people's lives are worth living by stipulating that a person's life is worth living if and only if her life's *overall score* on distinct dimensions of worth meets a specified *LWL threshold*.<sup>56</sup>

There are at least two reasons to doubt that the objection from reliable judgments shows that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC. First, grounding reliable LWL judgments would require those who debate about the RC to specify *what dimensions* of worth are putatively tracked by the LWL threshold, measure how specific lives *fare* in terms of single dimensions of worth, and *integrate* these measures into well-defined overall measures of the extent to which these lives are worth living. Regrettably, the proffered debates about the RC have not addressed these justificatory issues (Section 3). Second,



even if those issues were addressed, there would remain the problem of establishing *what LWL threshold* lives would have to meet to qualify as worth living, i.e. how exactly aggregate measures of how the examined lives fare in terms of different dimensions of worth map on the LWL threshold. This problem poses significant challenges to those who debate about the RC. For profound divergences remain concerning both *where* the LWL threshold can be plausibly located<sup>57</sup> and *the extent* to which this threshold *varies* interpersonally and/or intertemporally for the same persons.<sup>58</sup> These divergences, in turn, significantly hinder the prospects of attempts to ground reliable LWL judgments concerning both actual lives about which we may lack relevant information and imaginary lives whose components are *ex hypothesi* all known to us.<sup>59</sup>

A proponent of the objection from reliable judgments may object that those who debate about the RC can ground reliable LWL judgments by focusing on the *specific periods* that constitute people's lives (rather than entire lives) and by integrating judgments about the extent to which these periods are worth experiencing into judgments about the extent to which the lives that encompass such periods are worth living.<sup>60</sup> Suppose, for the sake of argument, that those who debate about the RC can ground reliable judgments about the extent to which the specific periods that constitute people's lives are worth experiencing. This does not *per se* imply that those who debate about the RC can ground reliable judgments about the extent to which the lives that encompass such periods are worth living. For attempts to reliably assess the extent to which entire lives are worth living face daunting *aggregation problems* not faced by attempts to assess the extent to which specific periods are worth experiencing (e.g. how to weight and integrate the assessment of different positive and negative periods into LWL judgments). And even in those cases where these aggregation problems can be addressed, significant differences remain between attempts to assess the extent to which specific periods are worth experiencing and attempts to reliably assess the extent to which entire lives are worth living. In particular, attempts to assess the extent to which specific periods are worth experiencing usually involve a comparison between well-defined (or at least identifiable) experiences and states of affairs (e.g. spending one week revising one's article about the RC versus spending one week sunbathing in Sardinia). Conversely, attempts to reliably assess the extent to which entire lives are worth living typically involve a comparison with a state of *non-existence* which is extremely hard to conceptualize and evaluate in terms of overall worth.<sup>61</sup>

#### 4.3. Objection from Comparative Judgments

The *objection from comparative judgments* holds that the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL do not hamper meaningful debate about the RC since those who debate about the RC can determine whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant by grounding *comparative LWL judgments*, i.e. judgments stating that some lives (or lives in particular conditions) are more or less worth living than other lives (or lives in other conditions). The idea is that despite the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL, those who debate about the RC can reliably assess whether some lives are more (or less) worth living than other lives<sup>62</sup> and that this assessment, in turn, enables us to engage in meaningful debate about the RC.

There are at least two reasons to doubt that the objection from comparative judgments shows that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC. First, the ambiguities

inherent in the notion of LWL hamper attempts to determine *what* comparative LWL judgments are supposed to *mean* (Section 3). Hence, even if those who debate about the RC make comparative LWL judgments, it remains hard to see what exactly these authors mean when they claim that some lives are more (or less) worth living than other lives unless such authors provide plausible and detailed specifications of what they take the notion of LWL to mean. Second, comparative LWL judgments do not *entail* reliable judgments about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living.<sup>63</sup> To be sure, various accounts have been proposed to quantify the value of populations and of individuals' lives in the specialized literature.<sup>64</sup> Still, these accounts do not aim to specify how the informative evaluations they yield map on LWL judgments.<sup>65</sup> As a result, those accounts do not enable those who debate about the RC to ground reliable LWL judgments about the lives of the people in the populations figuring in the RC.

A proponent of the objection from comparative judgments may object that those who debate about the RC can ground reliable LWL judgments about the lives of the people in the populations figuring in the RC by specifying a set of *typical features* (e.g. faring highly in terms of ethical worth and/or prudential worth) that purportedly make lives worth living and by demarcating a family of LWL-related concepts linked by *family resemblances*.<sup>66</sup> However, substantiating this objection would require one to specify what makes the typical features purportedly associated with LWL typical features of LWL as opposed to typical features of *some other* concepts. For without this specification, those who debate about the RC lack reliable criteria to determine which conceptual resemblances ground membership of the LWL family and which conceptual resemblances do not. Regrettably, the proffered debates about the RC have not addressed these definitional concerns. Moreover, the profound divergences between the many senses that the notion of LWL is ascribed in axiological and ethical debates give reasons to doubt that all the typical features associated with LWL are typical features of one and the same concept.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4.4. Objection from Core Cases

The *objection from core cases* holds that the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL do not hamper meaningful debate about the RC since those who debate about the RC can determine whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant by identifying various *core cases* of LWL, i.e. cases of individuals' lives (or lives in particular conditions) that most people deem to be (or not to be) worth living.<sup>68</sup> The idea is that despite the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL, those who debate about the RC are often able to reach agreement about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living<sup>69</sup> and that this agreement, in turn, indicates that those who debate about the RC share a substantive understanding of the notion of LWL.

There are at least two reasons to doubt that the objection from core cases shows that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC. First, those who debate about the RC frequently *fail* to reach agreement about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living (e.g. Section 3 on several authors' disagreements regarding which sets of lives are plausibly regarded as barely worth living). Second, most of the cases where those who debate about the RC reach agreement are more plausibly regarded as core cases of lives that fare highly (or poorly) in terms of *particular dimensions* of worth (e.g. ethical worth, prudential worth) rather than core cases of LWL. To be sure,

various authors speak as if their evaluations of how specific lives fare in terms of particular dimensions of worth reflect reliable LWL judgments concerning these lives.<sup>70</sup> Still, inferences from evaluations concerning how specific lives fare in terms of particular dimensions of worth do not directly license all-encompassing judgments about the extent to which such lives are worth living. For the notion of LWL is typically taken to encompass several dimensions of worth.<sup>71</sup> And it remains unclear how judgments as to how specific lives fare in terms of different dimensions of worth map on LWL judgments.

A proponent of the objection from core cases may object that those who debate about the RC *frequently* endorse nominally similar judgments about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living.<sup>72</sup> However, one may point to several cases where those who debate about the RC *fail* to endorse nominally similar judgments about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living (Section 3). Moreover, even assuming that those who debate about the RC frequently endorse nominally similar LWL judgments, the alleged fact that those who debate about the RC frequently endorse *nominally* similar LWL judgments falls short of indicating that these authors endorse similar (or even logically consistent) *substantive* LWL judgments (Section 4.1). In fact, there are reasons to doubt that different authors' endorsement of nominally similar LWL judgments indicates any substantive agreement about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living.

To illustrate this, consider the issue of what goods (or evils) and experiences can contribute to making life worth (or not worth) living. Those who debate about the RC typically characterize the putative goods (or evils) and experiences that can contribute to making life worth (or not worth) living at a rather high level of abstraction.<sup>73</sup> As a result, nominal agreement that lives including these goods (or evils) and experiences are worth (or not worth) living is compatible with substantive disagreement as to what these LWL judgments mean. In this respect, it is telling that when particular goods (or evils) and experiences are characterized in detail, different authors disagree about the extent to which these goods (or evils) and experiences can contribute to making life worth (or not worth) living.<sup>74</sup> These disagreements, in turn, hamper meaningful debate about the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant. For establishing whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant requires those who debate about the RC to assess the extent to which the lives of the people in the populations figuring in the RC are worth living (Section 3).

#### 4.5. Objection from Conceptual Precisification

The *objection from conceptual precisification* holds that the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL do not hamper meaningful debate about the RC since those who debate about the RC can determine whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant by *precisifying* the proffered characterizations of the notion of LWL. The idea is that despite the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL, those who debate about the RC can provide precisified characterizations of this notion<sup>75</sup> and can engage in meaningful debate about modified versions of the RC that rely on precisified characterizations of the notion of LWL.<sup>76</sup>

There are at least two reasons to doubt that the objection from conceptual precisification shows that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC. First, the objection does not address the proposed dissolution's challenge that different authors'

positions on the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant *crucially depend* on what characterizations of the notion of LWL are presupposed by such authors. In this respect, it would be of limited import to object that those who debate about the RC can handle this dependency by grounding the debate about the RC on a series of conditionals of the form ‘if lives (barely) worth living are such-and-such, then the RC can (or cannot) be avoided and is (or is not) actually repugnant’. For this objection would concede the proposed dissolution’s point that different authors’ positions on the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant *crucially depend* on what characterizations of the notion of LWL are presupposed by such authors. Second, it is hard to see on *what basis* those who debate about the RC are supposed to establish *which* precisified characterizations of the notion of LWL one should presuppose for the purpose of determining whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant. Hence, pointing to the possibility of precisifying the proffered characterizations of the notion of LWL does not *per se* show that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC.

A proponent of the objection from conceptual precisification may object that those who debate about the RC can determine whether the RC can be avoided and whether the RC is actually repugnant by *explicating* the notion of LWL in terms of well-defined notions such as levels of wellbeing, utility, or quality of life. The idea would be that those who debate about the RC can reformulate the RC by replacing the notion of LWL with some related notions and thereby circumvent the difficulties posed by the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL.<sup>77</sup> However, the notion of LWL is not *plausibly* explicated solely in terms of notions such as levels of wellbeing, utility, or quality of life (Section 3). Moreover, if one replaced the notion of LWL with notions such as levels of wellbeing, utility, or quality of life, this replacement would *significantly alter* the significance of the RC. Hence, pointing to the possibility of replacing the notion of LWL with notions such as levels of wellbeing, utility, or quality of life does not *per se* show that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC.

To illustrate this, consider the proffered attempts to explicate the notion of LWL solely in terms of *wellbeing levels*. The idea is that lives having positive wellbeing levels are worth living, lives having negative wellbeing levels are not worth living, and lives having zero wellbeing level are neither worth living nor not worth living.<sup>78</sup> If the notion of LWL was plausibly explicated solely in terms of wellbeing levels, then one could reformulate the RC as the claim that ‘for any perfectly equal population with very high positive welfare, there is a [much larger] population with very low positive welfare which is better’.<sup>79</sup> However, the notion of LWL is not plausibly explicated solely in terms of wellbeing levels. For the notion of LWL involves additional dimensions of worth besides prudential worth and is not reducible to wellbeing levels (Section 3). Moreover, if one replaced the notion of LWL with the notion of wellbeing levels, this replacement would significantly alter the significance of the RC.<sup>80</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This article articulated and defended a dissolution of the RC, which focuses on the notion of LWL figuring both in Parfit’s formulation of the RC and in most responses to the RC. This dissolution holds not simply that those who debate about the RC speak of ‘LWL’ in

dissimilar senses or that it is difficult to ground reliable judgments about the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living. Rather, the proposed dissolution demonstrates that the notion of LWL itself is plagued by multiple ambiguities and that these ambiguities, in turn, hamper meaningful debate about both the issue of whether the RC can be avoided and the issue of whether the RC is actually repugnant. This result does not exclude that some modified versions of the RC may yield valuable insights about the value of populations and the tenability of different axiological/ethical theories. Still, if the proposed dissolution is correct, then the RC rests on an ill-defined notion and those who debate about the RC lack the information required to assess the merits of the RC. Moreover, there are reasons to doubt the prospects of the ongoing attempts to resolve or circumvent the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL figuring in the RC. As a result, it remains dubious that we can engage in meaningful debate about the RC.

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## NOTES

- 1 Parfit, "Overpopulation," 150, italics added; also Parfit, "Future Generations," 142; *Reasons and Persons*, 388; "Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?," 110; "Future People," 124, for analogous formulations of the RC.
- 2 E.g. Arrhenius, *Population Ethics*; Rabinowicz, "Derek Parfit's Contributions"; Zuber *et al.*, "Repugnant Conclusion," for recent reviews.
- 3 E.g. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 385; Ryberg, "Worthwhile Living," 240.
- 4 If the proposed dissolution is correct, then the ambiguities inherent in the notion of LWL may hamper a number of debates in axiology and population ethics besides the debate about the RC (e.g. Cowen, "Normative Population Theory," Crisp, *Mill on Utilitarianism*, chap. 2, Ng, "Hurka's Gamble," on debates about intrapersonal analogues of the RC; Fumagalli, "Randomization Procedures," Kon, "Neonatal Euthanasia," Singer, *Practical Ethics*, on bioethical and public health debates on whether it is morally justifiable to terminate a person's life on the alleged ground that this life is not worth living). I focus on the debate about the RC for the purpose of this article.
- 5 E.g. Broome, *Weighing Lives*, 57, holding that people's intuitions concerning the RC are unreliable because the RC involves very large numbers and 'we have no reason to trust anyone's intuitions about very large numbers'; also Gustafsson, "Our Intuitive Grasp," 378, holding that people's intuitions concerning the RC are unreliable as evidence against Total Utilitarianism because people's 'intuitive understanding of the relevant factors' – e.g. numbers of individuals involved, quality of these individuals' lives – is 'unreliable [when] making trade-offs where the relevant factors are extremely proportioned in opposite ways'.
- 6 Zuber *et al.*, "Repugnant Conclusion," 381.

- 7 Parfit, "Overpopulation," 146.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 146.
- 9 E.g. *ibid.*, 150, speaking of 'ten billion people'.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 147–8; also Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 387.
- 13 Parfit, "Overpopulation," 147.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 148.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 147–8; also Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 387.
- 19 Parfit, "Overpopulation," 150.
- 20 Parfit, "Future Generations," 143; also Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 390.
- 21 E.g. Parfit, "Future People," 154; also Anglin, "Repugnant Conclusion," 749; Klocksiem, "Transitivity," 1311; Tännsjö, "Why We Ought to Accept the Repugnant Conclusion," 339. What is putatively 'repugnant' in the RC is not the possibility that we may face a choice between population A and population Z, but rather the comparative claim that Z is better than A (e.g. McMahan, "Problems," 119; Petersen, "On the Repugnance," 129; Rabinowicz, "Parfit's Appeal," 435). The alleged fact that we may not actually face a choice between A and Z (e.g. due to our technological limitations or to the finitude of natural resources) does not undermine the axiological and ethical significance of the RC (e.g. Parfit, "Future Generations," 145; also Cowen, "Repugnant Conclusion," 756).
- 22 E.g. Arrhenius, "Impossibility of a Satisfactory Population Ethics"; Arrhenius and Stefánsson, "Population Ethics"; Carlson, "Mere Addition"; and Kitchee, "Parfit's Puzzle," who take the alleged unavoidability of the RC to highlight the impossibility of developing a plausible axiology or population ethics; also Adler, "Future Generations"; Cowen, "Repugnant Conclusion"; Fleurbaey and Tungodden, "Tyranny"; and Spears and Budolfson, "Repugnant Conclusions," who defend the possibility of developing a plausible axiology or population ethics despite the alleged unavoidability of the RC.
- 23 E.g. Crisp, "Utilitarianism"; *Reasons and the Good*, chap. 4; Parfit, "Overpopulation"; "Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?"
- 24 E.g. Blackorby *et al.*, "Intertemporal Population Ethics"; Hurka, "Value"; Sider, "Theory X."
- 25 E.g. Blackorby *et al.*, "Critical-level Utilitarianism"; Kavka, "Paradox"; Klocksiem, "Transitivity."
- 26 E.g. Hájek and Rabinowicz, "Degrees of Commensurability"; Rabinowicz, "Incommensurability"; "Value Relations."
- 27 E.g. Andreou, "Parity"; Chang, "Possibility of Parity"; "Parity, Imprecise Comparability"; Qizilbash, "Mere Addition Paradox." Each of the theories proposed to demonstrate how one can avoid the RC has been subject to criticisms. For critical evaluations of superiority theories, see e.g. Arrhenius and Rabinowicz, "Millian Superiorities"; Jensen, "Millian Superiorities"; Ryberg, "Parfit's Repugnant Conclusion." For critical evaluations of variable value theories, see e.g. Bossert *et al.*, "Revisiting"; Huemer, "In Defence"; Kitchee, "Parfit's Puzzle." For critical evaluations of critical level theories, see e.g. Carlson, "Mere Addition"; Gustafsson, "Population Axiology"; Mulgan, "Reverse." For critical evaluations of incommensurability theories, see e.g. Broome, "Reply"; Chang, "Intuitive Case"; Qizilbash, "Incommensurability." For critical evaluations of parity theories, see e.g. Carlson, "Parity"; Handfield and Rabinowicz, "Incommensurability."
- 28 E.g. Chang, "How to Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion"; Greaves, "Population Axiology."
- 29 Ryberg, "Worthwhile Living," 240. Some authors hold that individuals' lives are always worth living irrespective of quality-of-life considerations (e.g. Barry, *Sanctity*; Kass, "Defending"). However, most authors doubt that individuals' lives are plausibly deemed to be worth living irrespective of any quality-of-life considerations (e.g. think of hypothetical lives entirely spent in excruciating loneliness and agony). Other authors hold that no individuals' lives are worth living (e.g. Benatar, *Better Never*). However, most authors concur that at least some individuals' lives are plausibly deemed to be worth living (e.g. Mulgan, "Reverse"; Ryberg, "Is the Repugnant Conclusion Repugnant?").
- 30 E.g. Meacham, "Person-Affecting Views"; Roberts, "Population Axiology."
- 31 E.g. Huemer, "In Defence"; Tännsjö, "Derek Parfit."
- 32 E.g. Beard, "Perfectionism," 124, holding that 'lives may [realize] impersonal moral value [...] that would otherwise not [exist]'; also Parfit, "Future Generations," 121, holding that 'there may be people whose lives, though worth living, are so diseased and deprived that [...] it seems bad that these people ever live'.



Parfit's formulation of the RC focuses on cases where 'no one would exist in more than one [population]' (ibid., 141). For their part, some authors focus on versions of the RC where the targeted populations may include overlapping subsets of unaffected lives (e.g. Spears and Budolfson, "Repugnant Conclusions"). I mention this point in passing since my dissolution of the RC does not depend on whether or not the targeted populations include overlapping subsets of unaffected lives.

- 33 E.g. Rachels, "Set"; Temkin, "Intransitivity."
- 34 E.g. Broome, *Weighing Lives*; Handfield, "Rational Choice"; Klocksiem, "Transitivity"; Parfit, "Future People"; Rabinowicz, "Parfit's Appeal"; Tännsjö, "Why We Ought to Accept the Repugnant Conclusion." Parfit's formulation of the RC draws on the total utilitarian assumption that 'other things [being] equal, it is better if there is a greater total sum of [...] whatever makes life worth living' (Parfit, "Overpopulation," 147–8). However, modifying this total utilitarian assumption does not *per se* enable one to avoid all versions of the RC (e.g. Arrhenius, "Impossibility of a Satisfactory Population Ethics"; Arrhenius and Stefánsson, "Population Ethics"; Carlson, "Mere Addition"; Kitcher, "Parfit's Puzzle"). In fact, the RC challenges not just consequentialist theories, but also a wide range of non-consequentialist (e.g. deontological) theories (e.g. McMahan, "Causing People to Exist"; Mulgan, "Dissolving"; Spears and Budolfson, "Repugnant Conclusions"; Zuber *et al.*, "Repugnant Conclusion").
- 35 E.g. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 385; Ryberg, "Repugnant Conclusion," 240.
- 36 E.g. Parfit, "Future Generations," 142; *Reasons and Persons*, 388; "Overpopulation," 150; "Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?," 110; "Future People," 124.
- 37 E.g. Kitcher, "Parfit's Puzzle," on the RC's dependence on comparisons between lives that are well worth living with lives that are barely worth living.
- 38 E.g. Blumenfeld, "Living Life"; Harries, "Questioning"; Metz, "Concept."
- 39 E.g. Broome, "Should We Value Population?"; Farsides and Dunlop, "Measuring"; McDermott, "Why Bother"; McMahan, "Death."
- 40 The three ambiguities I target in this section primarily hamper attempts to determine the extent to which specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living rather than attempts to determine what the claim that specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living means. I focus on these (rather than other) ambiguities since such ambiguities would hamper meaningful debate about the RC even if those who debate about the RC provided plausible and detailed specifications of what the claim that specific lives (or lives in particular conditions) are worth living means. I expand on the difficulty of providing such specifications in Section 4.
- 41 E.g. Parfit, "Overpopulation," on 'the best things in life'.
- 42 Metz, "Life Worth Living," 3602; also Metz, *Meaning*.
- 43 E.g. Sumner, *Welfare*, 20–25, on interrelations between prudential worth, aesthetic worth, perfectionist worth, and ethical worth.
- 44 E.g. Blumenfeld, "Living Life"; Feldman, "Justice."
- 45 E.g. Dasgupta, "Savings"; Ryberg, "Repugnant Conclusion"; Tännsjö, "Derek Parfit."
- 46 Tännsjö, "Derek Parfit," 390.
- 47 Tännsjö, "Why We Ought to Accept the Repugnant Conclusion," 341.
- 48 Ryberg, "Worthwhile Living," 239; also Tännsjö, "Why We Ought to Accept the Repugnant Conclusion," 346, holding that people in population Z 'probably live lives pretty much like the lives [lived by] affluent Western people'.
- 49 Dasgupta, "Savings," 116.
- 50 McMahan, "Problems," 118; also Petersen, "On the Repugnance," 131, claiming that the lives of 'most privileged people [...] can be significantly worsened and still be worth living'.
- 51 E.g. Zuber *et al.*, "Repugnant Conclusion," 380, claiming that the lives figuring in 'standard examples of lives "barely worth living" in the literature [may] be not worth living [...] may be not much worse than our lives [or] may be well worth living'; also Section 4. Some authors deny that the RC is actually repugnant and offer different explanations of why the RC may appear to be repugnant. For instance, some hold that the RC may appear to be repugnant because people frequently lack reliable intuitions concerning hypothetical cases involving very large populations and what it is like to live lives that are barely (or well) worth living (e.g. Broome, *Weighing Lives*, 56–7; Ryberg, "Is the Repugnant Conclusion Repugnant?," 143–4; "Worthwhile Living," 242–3, Tännsjö, "Why We Ought to Accept the Repugnant Conclusion," 345–9; "Derek Parfit," 388). For their part, others hold that the RC may appear to be repugnant because people fail to see how highly valuable populations may be constituted by many lives of small positive value (e.g. Adler, "Future Generations"; also Gustafsson, "Our Intuitive Grasp," Petersen, "On the Repugnance," and Pummer, "Intuitions," for critical discussion). I do not expand on the merits of these positions for the purpose of my evaluation.

- 52 E.g. Heyd, "Life," 37, holding that the extent to which life is worth living is 'a purely subjective matter'; also Harris, "Euthanasia," 11, holding that 'the value of our lives is the value we give to our lives'.
- 53 E.g. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, chap. 6; Wolf, "Happiness."
- 54 E.g. Fumagalli, "Eliminating"; Smuts, "Five Tests"; Wilkinson, "Best Interests," for illustrations.
- 55 E.g. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 257–8.
- 56 E.g. Harris, *Value of Life*; Kuhse, *Sanctity*; Singer, *Practical Ethics*, chap. 7, for different attempts to identify such a threshold.
- 57 E.g. Garrard and Wilkinson, "Selecting."
- 58 E.g. Grill, "Asymmetric Population Axiology."
- 59 E.g. Fumagalli, "Eliminating," for illustrations.
- 60 E.g. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 487, claiming that LWL judgments 'are often made about the last part of some life' and that if these judgments 'can apply to parts of a life, they can apply, I believe, to whole lives'.
- 61 E.g. Archard, "Wrongful Life"; Fumagalli, "On the Alleged Insignificance"; McMahan, "Causing People to Exist." A proponent of the objection from reliable judgments may further object that a state of non-existence can be reliably ascribed zero worth (e.g. Feldman, "Some Puzzles"; also Roberts, "Can it Ever," 168–9, on zero welfare; Adler, "Future Generations," 1506, on zero utility). Yet it seems more plausible to hold that a state of non-existence has no determinate worth, and having no determinate worth is not the same as having zero worth (e.g. Broome, "Goodness," Heyd, "Intractability"). In this respect, it would be of limited import to maintain that one may plausibly claim that it is better (or worse) for a person to exist than not to exist without having to ascribe any specific worth to the lives of persons who do not exist (e.g. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 487, claiming that 'if a certain kind of life is [worth living], it is better than nothing. If it is [not worth living], it is worse than nothing'). For 'nonexistence is not a condition [...] and so it is not better or worse than any other condition' (Buchanan *et al.*, *From Chance*, 234; also Broome, "Goodness," 77, and Gustafsson, "Population Axiology," 87, doubting that existence and non-existence are comparable in terms of personal value).
- 62 E.g. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 188, holding that 'on average [the lives of] disabled people living today [...] are less worth living than the lives of people who are not disabled'.
- 63 E.g. Singer, "Straw Men."
- 64 E.g. Barrie, "QALYs"; Broome, "Should We Value Population?"; McMahan, *Ethics of Killing*, chaps. 1–2, in the axiological and population ethics literatures; Burri, "Option Value"; Fleurbaey and Voorhoeve, "On the Social and Personal Value"; Fumagalli, "Please Wear a Mask," in the economic and medical ethics literatures.
- 65 E.g. Schramme, "Badness of Death."
- 66 E.g. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*.
- 67 E.g. Fumagalli, "Eliminating," for illustrations.
- 68 E.g. Parfit, "Overpopulation," 160, on imaginary lives consisting of decades of continual bliss such as the 'century of ecstasy'; also Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 391, on imaginary lives consisting of years of uninterrupted agony such as 'the wretched child'.
- 69 E.g. Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 214, holding that there are several situations where the judgment that a human life is not worth living 'is obviously correct'.
- 70 E.g. Kuhse, "Quality of Life"; Singer, *Practical Ethics*, chap. 7, on how the lives of persons with severe disabilities fare in terms of prudential worth.
- 71 E.g. Fumagalli, "Eliminating"; Sundstrom, "Peter Singer."
- 72 E.g. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 389, holding that 'we can imagine what it would be for someone's life to be barely worth living'.
- 73 E.g. Parfit, "Overpopulation," on 'the best things in life'.
- 74 E.g. Fumagalli, "Eliminating."
- 75 E.g. Parfit, "Overpopulation," 148, holding that a life may be barely worth living 'either because its ecstasies make its agonies seem just worth enduring, or because it [includes] nothing bad [but] little else that is good'.
- 76 E.g. Parfit, "Can We Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion?," 118, holding that the RC would be 'significantly less repugnant' if one focused on 'roller-coaster' lives that include 'some of the best things in life' rather than on 'muzak-and-potatoes' lives that include 'nothing bad, but very little that was good'.
- 77 E.g. Chang, "How to Avoid the Repugnant Conclusion," 393, on modified versions of the RC that posit a sequence of possible worlds where 'each successive world involves a slight decrease in the wellbeing of its people but some large addition of people leading lives with that diminished [...] wellbeing'; also Cowen, "Repugnant Conclusion," 754, on modified versions of the RC that posit a population with 'a large amount of total utility obtained by having very many persons living at near-zero levels of utility'.

- 78 E.g. Parfit, *Reasons and Persons*, 388; also Bossert, “Anonymous Welfarism,” 65; Huemer, “In Defence,” 901; Kitcher, “Parfit’s Puzzle,” 575.
- 79 Arrhenius, “Impossibility Theorem,” 248; also Gustafsson, “Our Intuitive Grasp,” 371; Jensen, “Millian Superiorities,” 279.
- 80 E.g. Spears and Budolfson, “Repugnant Conclusions,” 576, holding that if the expression ‘lives that are barely worth living’ figuring in the RC was taken to indicate lives with ‘slightly-positive wellbeing [then] it is not clear why any [comparative claim about the value of such lives] would be “repugnant”’. Analogous remarks hold regarding putative attempts to explicate the notion of LWL in terms of prescriptive notions. To illustrate this, suppose one maintained that the evaluative claim that a person’s life is worth living is equivalent to the prescriptive claim that this person should be allowed to live (rather than be let die). It is hard to see what reasons or evidence may ground this purported equivalence. Moreover, if the evaluative claim that a person’s life is worth living was equivalent to the prescriptive claim that this person should be allowed to live (rather than be let die), then various long-lasting axiological and ethical debates would seem to have implausibly trivial answers (e.g. Archard, “Wrongful Life”; Kon, “Neonatal Euthanasia”; Wilkinson, “Best Interests,” on the debate whether it is permissible to let newborns who would putatively have lives worth living die).

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