**Is the lifetime well-being of persons all that matters in population axiology?**

In this paper I argue that populations of lives have a value that cannot be expressed as a simple function of the welfare level of these lives. A life is “the features of the world that can affect how good things are for [a] person” (Broome) and the welfare level of a life is “how good or bad a life is for the person living it” (Arrhenius). A population is a set of lives and I shall understand the All Things Considered Value of a Life to be the value a life contributes to the aggregation function for the value of a population. The paper will attempt to show how All Things Considered Value of a Life might differ from a life’s welfare level and that the value of a population cannot be determined from the welfare level of all the lives in that population. One implication of this result is that we cannot determine the value of populations from ‘box diagrams’, where a population is graphically represented by a histogram of the welfare level of all its component lives.

Note that this claim is not the same as two more common kinds of claim about the value of populations.

1. The ‘all things considered’ value of a life is not the same as its welfare level. On its own, this is a view that all non-totalists would accept, but they would not accept the second part of my claim. One type of theory that would imply this claim is the view that the value of a lives is not separable, for instance because it is affected by the distribution of welfare across lives. My argument will attempt to show that the value of lives and of welfare components is not separable. However it is also meant to show that the value of populations does not supervene on welfare levels and that the value of lives does not supervine on welfare components only, a claim that goes beyond mere separability
2. The value of a population cannot be determined from the All Things Considered value of its lives. This extreme claim would imply that something other than a population’s lives determines its value, but this does not make sense since all other features of a world are excluded from a population. Whilst I will argue that the value of lives is not only determined by their welfare levels I will nevertheless not claim that it is determined by anything other than features of these lives.

I will argue for my thesis by defending the view that whilst only the features of lives have value their value is not the same as their contribution to a life’s welfare level. This is because the perspective of ‘the person living a life’ is not the only morally important perspective from which these features can be evaluated. I will further argue that we cannot eliminate these values merely by wielding a ‘ceteris paribus’ clause.

Consider Methuselah:

*―At the age of 100 he still remembers his childhood. But new memories crowd out the old. At the age of 150 he has hardly any memories that go back before his twentieth year. At the age of 200 he has hardly any memories that go back before his seventieth year; and so on. When he dies at the age of 969, he has hardly any memories that go beyond his 839th year. As he grows older he grows wiser; his callow opinions and character at age 90 have vanished almost without a trace by age 220, but his opinions and character at age 220 have also vanished almost without a trace by age 350. He soon learns that it is futile to set goals for himself too far ahead. At age 120, he is still somewhat interested in fulfilling those ambitions he held at age 40; but at age 170 he cares nothing for those ambitions, and it is beginning to take an effort of will to summon up interest in fulfilling his aspirations at age 80. And so it goes.* (Lewis (1976) 65–66)

Derek Parfit argues that in this case Methuselah has one reason to care about his life ‘as a whole’ and other reasons to care about different parts of his life distinctly. I believe that these reasons extend to our all things considered judgements about this life and that they can alter its value. Methuselah is a person with a unified life. However, this may not be his only morally significant feature. Three other morally significant features of Methuselah’s life could be his suffering bad things, his enjoyment of the best things in life and his participation in group agency.

Some people think that suffering is worse if it is ‘uncompensated’. Uncompensated suffering is usually understood to mean suffering in a life with negative welfare. If Methuselah suffers terribly from age 120 to age 350 but goes on to have a very enjoyable life some of this suffering will remain ‘uncompensated’, even if his life has positive welfare. This will lower the All Things Considered value of his life. This would also imply that it can be good to increase the level of compensation for bad things even if this reduces the total quantity of welfare.

If Methuselah comes to enjoy some of the best things in life between ages 350 and age 580 he may view this enjoyment as of greater value at the time than he would do from the perspective of his life as a whole. If enjoyment of the best things in life corresponds to something like the subjective realisation of objective value in one’s life then its true value can only be appreciated by perspectives that share these same judgements. Furthermore, Methuselah may view the more negative aspects of this period as entirely worthwhile, even though they lower the welfare level of his life as a whole.

If methuselah has some desire at age 100 that he cannot satisfy until age 700 but shares this desire with a close intimate who could satisfy it in his own life straight away, then he would have more reason to care about his friend’s satisfaction than his own, even though this will not increase his welfare level. Satisfying this desire would be good, even though it does not raise his welfare level. To the extent that a person’s desires, memories and psychological traits are shared by a group agent of which they are part this may make these psychological states more valuable then their contribution to the welfare of that person, even if they do not contribute to the welfare of anyone else.

Our own lives are very different from Methuselahs. However many of these points still apply. Our limits, as people, are not hard and are a matter of degree. We can be more or less connected to particular parts of our lives and we may be somewhat connected to events outside of our lives. For this reason, good things such as the best things in life, which are characterised by high levels of psychological connectedness, bad things, such as pain and suffering, and collective goods may all have an all things considered value that is not reflected in their effect upon our welfare levels.

Some people argue that whilst considerations like these might be at play in our evaluation of lives they should not make a difference because we can assume that these features of lives make no difference to the value of the populations under consideration.

“[W]elfare is the only axiologically relevant aspect which may be different in the compared populations…. the compared populations should be roughly equally good with regard to other axiologically relevant aspects” (Arrhenius)

We can exclude many kinds of value from our considerations by wielding this clause. However we cannot exclude any value that is 1) closely related to welfare, 2) axiologically significant for our evaluation of lives and where 3) at least two populations under consideration are unequally good with regards to this value. These three conditions hold for some of the goods I have mentioned in relation to comparisons involving the populations of the Repugnant and Very Repugnant Conclusions

Very high welfare lives must contain some of the best things in life

Low welfare lives either contain none of the best things in life, or must contain significant quantities of bad things

The absence of any very happy lives in a population is sufficient evidence for the lack of an reasonably just society with a flourishing culture.

These facts can explain what is repugnant about the Repugnant Conclusions, but if they do then they imply that in cases involving the Repugnant Conclusions (or Arrhenius’ ‘Quality Conditions’) the effects of the constituents of a life on its value cannot be ruled out using a ceteris paribus clause.