Mere Addition and the Separateness of Persons: A Candidate for Theory X

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Some suggest that we can block the repugnant conclusion by claiming that good lives are lexically better than mediocre ones. Yet this does not solve the mere addition paradox. The puzzle remains why we should not add lives worth living. After we have added new people, it is equally hard to say why we should not redistribute—which both increases utility and benefits the worse-off—and continue the march to world Z.

I argue that the mere addition paradox arises because it entails two types of aggregation. In the choice between worlds A and Z, all the parties who ever exist will be equally well-off. Given a choice between a single good life in A, and all the lives in Z lived end to end, we would choose the former. We thus consider A lexically superior. But after mere addition, if we refuse to redistribute, we will leave some better off at the expense of others. “[T]here is a shift,” as Michael Otsuka and Alex Voorhoeve observe, “…in the moral weight one ought to give to changes in utility when we move from cases of intrapersonal trade-off to cases of interpersonal trade-off where some end up less well off than others.” If moral weight shifts, it can produce intransitivity of value.

Suppose we are comparing worlds J and K, and only J’s welfare falls above the lexical level. We adopt, in Rawls’s phrase, “the principle of rational choice for one man,” and judge J better than K. But if we move to world J+, distributive justice will come into play. To add lives below the lexical level contributes only a small amount of value. But helping badly off people has a great deal of value. If we add the new people, it will become better to move on to K. Since J is better than K, we should draw the line at J.
The mere addition paradox seems to call nearly every moral theory into question. But no principle can tell us how to maximize value when our choices will affect everyone the same way, how to maximize value when our choices will affect different people in the population differently, and tell us to do the same thing in both cases. This solves the mere addition paradox and clears the way for an impersonal theory of population ethics.