



Weighing and Reasoning: Themes from the Philosophy of John Broome

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Being and Wellbeing

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter discusses the question of whether we can make it better for a person by creating her. It argues that John Broome's argument for a negative answer to this question can be improved upon to avoid some recent criticisms. Instead of being concerned with whether a state of affairs that is better for you *would* be better for you if it obtained, we should ask whether it *could* make things better for you. It is also shown that these criticisms assume a mistaken idea about what it means to say that abstract states of affairs have value. The correct idea is that valuable states of affairs are possible value-makers of the world.

Keywords: benefit, existence, wellbeing, person-affecting, population ethics

Morality is in part concerned with what is better or worse for people.¹ Other things being equal, it is better to make things better for people, and it is worse to make things worse for them. However, it is unclear how we are to put this person-affecting idea of morality to use in cases where the identity of people is at stake, that is, cases where, depending on what we decide to do, different people will come to exist in the future. In order to apply this idea to these cases, we need to be able to say whether coming into existence can be better or worse for people. But can it really be better for a person to exist than not to exist? John Broome thinks not, and his views on this question, and more generally on the problems of population ethics, have been extremely influential, not just among philosophers but also among economists and policy-makers. In this short chapter, I shall present Broome's original argument, show that it is not fully

convincing as it stands, and then argue that there is a better argument in the vicinity that is more convincing.²

Here is how Broome stated his argument:

[I]t cannot ever be true that it is better for a person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all. If it were better for a person that she lives than that she should never have lived at all, then if she had never lived at all, that would have been worse for her than if she had lived. But if she had never lived at all, there would be no her for it to be worse for, so it could not have been worse for her.³

One natural way to spell it out is this:

1. If your existence is better for you than your non-existence, then your non-existence is worse for you than your existence.
2. If your non-existence *is* worse for you than your existence, then your non-existence *would* be worse for you if you did not exist.
- (p.88)** 3. It is not the case that your non-existence would be worse for you if you did not exist.

So

4. It is not the case that your existence is better for you than your non-existence.

Here, (1) seems innocent since it just follows from the fact that 'worse' is the converse of 'better'. Also, (3) seems plausible if we accept that 'wellbeing entails being': x is better for S than y only if x , y , and S exist. Hence, if S does not exist, there is a missing *relatum*, and it cannot be true that x is better for S than y . It is true that some have objected to this idea, but this is not the place to engage with their arguments.⁴ That leaves us with (2). Why should we accept it? One could claim it is an instance of the following general principle:

Counterfactual Support

If p is better for you than q , then p *would* be better for you than q , if p obtained.⁵

Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2014: 428) think this principle is the real culprit in Broome's argument. They point out that it is not logically true that if a relation R holds over states of affairs p , q , and person S , then R would hold over p , q , and S even if p were to obtain. For example, it does not hold if the relation is preference and the states of affairs are your non-existence and your existence and the person is you. However, Counterfactual Support need not be defended in

this way. One could claim that this principle holds for *value* relations. Why? One idea is that it holds because it follows from the following more general principle:

Axiological Invariance

If *p* has absolute or comparative value for a person, it would have this value, no matter whether *p* were to obtain or not.

This is not a good way of defending Counterfactual Support, however, because it would rule out that existence can be *bad*, *good*, or *neutral* for a person. If *S* does not exist, then it is not true to say that her existence *is* good for *S*, only that her existence *would* be good for *S*, if she existed. But this is then a violation of Axiological Invariance.

Another idea would be to say that ‘*x* is better for *S* than *y*’ entails ‘*S* would be better off in *x* than in *y*’, and to be better off in *x* than in *y* requires that *S* exists both in *x* and in *y*. But this may seem question-begging, since the opponents could just say that this entailment does not hold in general, but only when *S* exists in both *x* and *y*.⁶

(p.89) So, we are stuck. It is time to take a step back. I think we can avoid the issue of whether Counterfactual Support is true, for there seems to be a better argument in the vicinity of Broome’s own argument that does not rely on this principle. Instead of being concerned with whether a state of affairs that is better for you *would* be better for you if it obtained, we should ask whether it *could* make *things* better for you.

To spell this out, it is useful to first consider the opponents’ view. Their positive view is that the better-for relation is defined over a set of abstract states of affairs that can exist without obtaining. That is why they think it is perfectly coherent to say that my existence is better for me than my non-existence when I exist, since my existence and my non-existence are both states of affairs that co-exist with me, even though only the former state of affairs obtains. But what exactly do we mean when we say that abstract entities such as states of affairs have value?

In order to answer this question, it is useful to think about what it is for properties such as bravery and courage to have value. If courage is good, then it is possible for people to be good (at least to some extent) in virtue of exemplifying courage. If bravery is good, then it is possible for people to be good (at least to some extent), in virtue of exemplifying bravery. The same holds for all other virtue properties. The slogan is: a good character trait could ‘rate a person a plus’.

As Danielsson, drawing on Chisholm and Sosa, has suggested, this can be generalized to the value of states of affairs.⁷ If a state of affairs *p* is good, then it

is possible for something ('the universe' as Chisholm and Sosa think of it) to be good (at least to some extent) in virtue of exemplifying p . In slogan form: a good state of affairs could 'rate the universe a plus'.⁸ So, on this understanding of the values of abstract entities, if a property or state of affairs has value, then it is a possible *value-maker* of something.

Applied to wellbeing, this means that if a state of affairs p is good for you, then it is possible for something to be good for you (at least to some extent) in virtue of exemplifying p . (*Mutatis mutandis* for 'bad for' and 'neutral for'.) The slogan is: states of affairs that are good for you could rate the universe a plus for you. They are possible good-for-you makers.

Note that the account does not say that when a state of affairs or property has a certain degree of value it must always make the things that exemplify the state of affairs or property (the exemplifiers) have this exact degree of value. It only says that good states of affairs or properties *could* make the relevant exemplifiers (or some parts or aspects of them) have *some degree* of goodness. So, we even allow for the possibility that a good state of affairs or property could make the exemplifiers bad to **(p.90)** some extent. Perhaps your feeling pleasure is good, but, when you feel pleasure because you engage in sadistic torture, the situation is made bad, not good. Furthermore, nothing is said about how the overall value of an exemplifier is calculated; we have only said that it is possible that a good state of affairs or property would make some part or aspect of an exemplifier have some degree of goodness. It is left open how this degree of goodness should be weighed against other values when calculating the *overall* value of the exemplifier.

If we accept this understanding of the values of abstract states of affairs, we have a quick argument against the idea that existence can be better for you than non-existence.

1. If your existence is better for you than your non-existence, then your non-existence is either good, bad, or neutral for you.
2. If your non-existence is good for you, then it is possible that something is good (to some extent) for you in virtue of exemplifying your non-existence.
3. If your non-existence is bad for you, then it is possible that something is bad (to some extent) for you in virtue of exemplifying your non-existence.
4. If your non-existence is neutral for you, then it is possible that something is neutral for you in virtue of exemplifying your non-existence.
5. It is not possible that something is (to some extent) good, bad, or neutral for you in virtue of exemplifying your non-existence.

So

6. It is not the case that your existence is better for you than your non-existence.

Here, (1) follows from the plausible assumption that if x is better for you than y , then either (a) both x and y are good for you, but y is less good for you, (b) both x and y are bad for you, but x is less bad for you, (c) x is good for you and y is neutral for you, (d) x is good for you and y is bad for you, or (e) x is neutral for you and y is bad for you.⁹

Next, (2), (3), and (4) follow from the definition of value-for as defined over abstract states of affairs. Finally, (5) follows from the assumption that not just wellbeing but also ill-being and neutral-being each entails being, which seems plausible since, if 'good for' picks out a relation between people and states of affairs, then it is difficult to see why 'bad for' and 'neutral for' would not do the same.

Rabinowicz and Arrhenius (2014: 432) acknowledge that one possible objection to their view is that 'the world is not made any better by the existence of such **(p.91)** states'.¹⁰ But they point out that it would not help to say that it is the *obtaining* of one state of affairs that is better for a person than the *obtaining* of another, since often the compared states of affairs cannot both obtain. For example, we cannot say that the *obtaining* of my existence is better than the *obtaining* of my non-existence, for the obtaining of one of these states necessarily excludes the obtaining of the other. This problem can be evaded, they think, by insisting that the very states of affairs themselves, and not just their obtaining can have value.

Now, the account I have given does not assume that we compare the values of *obtaining* states of affairs (if the obtaining of state of affair p is supposed to be identical to the *fact* that p obtains).¹¹ It only assumes that if one state of affairs p is better for a person than another q , p has some value (good, bad, neutral), such that it is possible that something is valuable (good, bad, neutral), in certain respects and to some extent, in virtue of exemplifying p .

Of course, to have a complete account of comparative value I need to say something about what it means to say that something would (or could) be better for a person if it exemplified state of affairs p rather than state of affairs q , where p and q are incompatible. But this, as Rabinowicz and Arrhenius point out, is an instance of a general problem in axiology. The general problem has to be addressed whenever we consider claims about the comparative value of incompatible features. **(p.92)** For example, we need to address this problem when we consider claims about the comparative value of incompatible character traits, for example, *You would be a better person if you were brave rather than cowardly*. Indeed, the problem has to be addressed whenever we consider *cross-*

world comparisons such as, *I would have been less fat if I had been eating healthy food rather than chips and hamburgers*. Since the problem is not specific to the issue at hand but pertains to all cross-world comparatives I think we can ignore it here.¹²

Arrhenius and Rabinowicz allow for the possibility that there are entities that are valuable for a person even though they *could not* contribute any value for this person in worlds in which they exist. These values are therefore *necessarily evaluatively inert for a person*. If I am right, there cannot be any such values. We all agree that if a character trait cannot contribute any positive value to a person, it cannot be a valuable character trait. The same holds, I contend, for wellbeing: if a state of affairs cannot contribute any value for you, then it cannot have any value for you. In its most general formulation the idea is that if a property or state of affairs cannot contribute any value to the things that exemplify it, then it cannot have any value.

Guardian Angel Arguments

At this point, the opponents could turn the tables and present the following interesting argument *for* the possibility of existence being better for you than non-existence.

1. If your existence is good for you, then someone who only cares about your wellbeing (your guardian angel) would prefer your existence to your non-existence.
2. If your guardian angel prefers your existence to your non-existence, then your existence is better for you than your non-existence.

So,

3. If your existence is good for you, then your existence is better for you than your non-existence.

(p.93) I think (2) is questionable. It is true that what your guardian angel prefers is what is better for you in cases where your existence is not at stake and her preference is about states that have a defined value for you. However, from the fact that your guardian angel prefers your existence to your non-existence, it does not follow that existence is better for you. Suppose that your existence is good for you and, as I have been arguing, your non-existence is neither good, bad, nor neutral for you. What do we expect my guardian angel to prefer? My existence to my non-existence, of course, since in a choice between something that is good for me and something that lacks any value for me, she should prefer what is good for me. In general, in a choice between a good *x* and a *y* that lacks any value (is neither good, bad, nor neutral), it is reasonable to prefer *x* to *y*. So, you can care about goodness and prefer *x* to *y* without *x* being better than *y*.

Primitive Absolute Wellbeing?

I have to deny the general principle that if p is good for you, then p is better for you than not- p , since I do not want to say that if existence is good for you, then existence is better for you than non-existence. One may worry that this means that I will have to accept *primitive* absolute wellbeing. But this is not so. For I could say that (for all possible states of affairs p):

- p is indifferent in value for S iff $p = S$'s being F , for some F , and S 's being F has the same value for S as S 's being not- F .

(Note that S 's being not- F ascribes a negative property to S , *being not- F* .)

- p is good for S iff p is better for S than something that is indifferent in value for S .
- p is bad for S iff p is worse for S than something that is indifferent in value for S .
- p is neutral for S iff p has the same value for S as something that is indifferent in value for S .

To have well-behaved absolute values (e.g. nothing can be both good and bad for you), I also have to assume that:

- if p is indifferent in value for S and q is indifferent in value for S , then p and q have the same value for S .¹³

(p.94) So, if your existence is good for you, then your existence is better for you than some state of the form *your being F* , which is such that *your being F* has the same value for you as *your being not- F* .

Concluding Remarks

While I have my doubts about Broome's argument, I agree with him that a person's existence cannot be better or worse for her than her non-existence. The reason why this is so is better seen if we consider what it is for an abstract state of affair to have value. An abstract state of affairs has a certain value only if it can make something have this value. Since my non-existence cannot make things have *any* value for me, it lacks value for me. Now, this means, of course, that I cannot rely on a person-affecting morality in all cases. Here Broome and I face similar problems. We need to somehow extend, amend, or supplement our person-affecting moral principles so that they apply to cases where the identity of people is at stake. That this is no easy task has been shown by Broome himself in his important work on population ethics.¹⁴ But that it is an extremely urgent task is beyond doubt. For example, in order to decide what we should do with climate change we need to know how much weight we should give to the fact that we may prevent the existence of a huge number of valuable future lives by not taking sufficiently radical measures.

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Notes:

- ⁽¹⁾ I would like to thank Erik Carlson and Anandi Hattiangadi for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.
- ⁽²⁾ I endorsed an argument similar to Broome’s in a prior article (Bykvist 2007). So I am in effect arguing against my earlier self in this chapter.
- ⁽³⁾ Broome 1999: 168.
- ⁽⁴⁾ For an interesting argument of this kind, see Fleurbaey and Voorhoeve (this volume, Chapter 7).
- ⁽⁵⁾ In Rabinowicz and Arrhenius (2014), this principle (strengthened to a biconditional) is called ‘Subjunctive Connection 1’. In Bykvist (2007), it is called ‘Accessibility’.
- ⁽⁶⁾ Adler (2009) makes a similar point.
- ⁽⁷⁾ Chisholm and Sosa 1966; Danielsson 2001.

(⁸) In fact, I think this idea can be generalized even further to the normative status of actions. If an abstract act-type, such as lying or killing, is wrong, then it is possible that some act-token of this type is *pro tanto* wrong in virtue of exemplifying the type in question.

(⁹) The argument is robust enough to survive some tweaking of this premise. Perhaps there are *indeterminate* values for people, things that are neither good, bad, nor neutral for people, but still valuable for them. Certain disjunctive states, such as your being happy or your feeling indifference, come to mind. However, even for these states of affairs it holds that it must be possible that something is good, bad, or neutral for you in virtue of exemplifying them. In particular, note that it is possible that the world (or some part thereof) would be good for you, if it exemplified your being happy or your feeling indifference in virtue of exemplifying your being happy.

(¹⁰) Arrhenius and Rabinowicz (2014: 432). In a footnote, they thank Erik Carlson for pressing this point, but do not say exactly what his point was. In conversation, after I had written this chapter, Carlson told me that his idea was that they have to deny the natural idea that a state of affairs *p* is better for *S* than another incompatible state of affairs *q* just in case *S*'s life in the nearest possible world where *p* obtains is better than *S*'s life in the nearest possible world where *q* obtains. This idea is similar to mine, but there are some crucial differences. First, Carlson does not ground his idea about wellbeing comparisons in the more general idea that abstract features, such as states of affairs, are good in the sense that they are possible good-makers of things. Second, I do not take a stand on whether *lives* must be assigned value, I only claim that valuable states of affairs must be able to make something valuable to some extent. Third, if *p* is better for me than *q*, then Carlson would say that my life in the closest *p*-world would be better than my life in the closest *q*-world, whereas I am saying something much weaker: that *p* must be either good, bad, or neutral (or indeterminate), and that *p could* make *something* good, bad, or neutral (or indeterminate) *to some extent*. In fact, I do not think that Carlson's proposal is acceptable as it stands, since *p* can be better for me than *q* even though *p* would not make my whole life better, if it obtained. There might be some state of affairs *r*, which would obtain no matter whether *p* or *q* obtained, and which is such that *p* in combination with *r* is not better for me than *q* in combination with *r*. A possible case might be *p* = my feeling pleasure, *q* = my feeling displeasure, and *r* = my being such that I only take pleasure in harming others. In short, Carlson's proposal does not take seriously the possibility of organic unities.

(¹¹) The obtaining of *p* could be understood in other ways. For example, it could be understood as a *second-order* state of affairs: the state of affairs of *p*'s *obtaining*. But this cannot be what Rabinowicz and Arrhenius have in mind, since such second-order states of affairs can themselves exist without obtaining, and thus *p*'s *obtaining* and *q*'s *obtaining* can *co-exist* even if *p* and *q* cannot co-

obtain (cf. the second order propositions *that p is true* and *that q is true* can co-exist even if *p* and *q* cannot be true together).

An alternative option is to identify the obtaining of *p* with the *concrete occurrence* of *p*. This would lead to problems if we also said that *p* is better for a person than *q* just in case the concrete occurrence of *p* is better for *S* than the concrete occurrence of *q*. For when *p* and *q* are incompatible there can only be (at most) one concrete occurrence to take into account. But there is no need to consider the world in a state in which both *p* and *q* are exemplified. What we need to compare is the world in two *different* states, one in which it exemplifies *p* and another in which it exemplifies *q*.

(¹²) One option is to reduce value comparison to one of *degrees* of value. Applied to character traits, this account says (very roughly) that bravery is better than cowardice just in case the degree of value a person would have if she exemplified bravery is *m* and the degree of value the person would have if she exemplified cowardice is *n*, and $m > n$. The idea is that degrees of value exist in all (relevant) worlds, and the claim $m > n$ is therefore also true in all (relevant) worlds. This account is just an extension of the popular degree-theoretic account of cross-world comparisons: to say that *x* would be *F*-er if *p* than if *q* is to say (very roughly) that if *p* were the case, the degree of *F*-ness of *x* would be *m*, and if *q* were the case, the degree of *F*-ness of *x* would be *n*, and $m > n$.

(¹³) Johan Gustafsson (2013) has recently suggested a counterexample to this principle, and Carlson (2014) has suggested an alternative account of value that avoids the problem. I am not (yet) fully convinced that the counterexample is genuine. But, if it is, I am willing to go along with Carlson's proposal, which, applied to wellbeing, says (very roughly) that what is indifferent for a person is that which, when added to any other valuable state, does not make a difference in value for the person (i.e. things with and without the added state are equal in value for the person). Note that Carlson's account also reduces absolute values to comparative ones. In order to avoid problems with non-existence, I would add that what has value for *S* must be a state of affairs of the form *S*'s being *F*, where *F* can be a negative property.

(¹⁴) Broome (2004).

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