



Seminar

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Imprecision and the Repugnant Conclusion

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ABOUT GUSTAF ARRHENIUS

Gustaf Arrhenius received a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Toronto and a doctoral degree (FD) in Practical Philosophy from Uppsala University in 2000. He is currently Professor of Practical Philosophy at Stockholm University and co-chair of the Franco-Swedish Programme in Philosophy and Economics at the Collège d'études mondiales and SCAS (financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, RJ, and the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, FMSH). He is an affiliated researcher at the Oxford Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, University of Oxford; an Associate of the Institute for Futures Studies, Stockholm; an Associate of the Oxford Centre for Ethics and Philosophy of Law, University of Oxford; and a member of the Tampere Club, the Young Academy of Sweden and Academia Europaea. He was recently appointed Honorary Professor at the Department of Political Science and Government, Aarhus University.

Arrhenius has been Torgny Segerstedt Pro Futura Scientia Fellow at SCAS. Between 2001 and 2003, he held a visiting appointment at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Oxford, and during the autumn of 2006, he held a Senior Visiting Fellowship at Jesus College, University of Oxford. During the springs of 2008 to 2011, he was *chercheur étranger* at the Centre de Recherche Sens, Éthique et Société (CERSES), Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), Paris, and he was a Fellow at the Institut d'études avancées de Paris during the spring of 2010. Recently, Arrhenius was an H. L. A. Hart Visiting Fellow at University College, University of Oxford.

Arrhenius is the author of over forty scholarly publications. His research interests are primarily concerned with moral and political philosophy, especially issues pertaining to the intersection between moral and political philosophy and the medical and social sciences (e.g. economics, law and political science). The main focus of his research concerns which people should be included and how they should be included in different types of decisions. Arrhenius' current research mainly deals with population ethics and duties to future generations, the measurement of inequality, democratic theory and the measurement and distribution of power.

ABSTRACT

Many would agree that the present generation, at least in the affluent parts of the world, is profiting from the earth's resources at the expense of future generations. In combination with a steadily increasing population, this could result in a future world crowded with people whose lives are worth living but of poor quality because of environmental degradation and lack of resources. Assume that we have an opportunity to avoid this scenario and to create a world with a sizeable but smaller population in which every person enjoys very high quality of life. Which future is the better one? Most of us, it seems, find it evident that the latter future is superior to the former. For example, Derek Parfit, the 2014 Rolf Schock Laureate in Logic and Philosophy (<http://www.rolfshockprizes.se/pristagare2014/logikochfilosofi.55.html>), holds that the contrary claim would be an instance of his infamous "Repugnant conclusion":

"For any possible population of at least ten billion people, all with a very high quality of life, there must be some much larger imaginable population whose existence, if other things are equal, would be better even though its members have lives that are barely worth living" (Parfit 1984, p. 388).

The Repugnant Conclusion highlights a problem in an area of ethics which has become known as *population ethics* which involves foundational questions regarding our duties to future generations. The main problem in population ethics has been to find an adequate theory about the moral value of outcomes where the number of people, the quality of their lives, and their identities may vary. Since,

arguably, any reasonable moral theory has to take these aspects of possible outcomes into account when determining the normative status of actions, the study of population ethics is of general import for moral theory.

As the name indicates, Parfit finds the Repugnant Conclusion unacceptable and most philosophers agree. However, it has been surprisingly difficult to find a theory that avoids the Repugnant Conclusion without implying other equally counterintuitive conclusions (for a summary, see Arrhenius et al. 2010). Actually, as I have shown, it is impossible to avoid the Repugnant Conclusion (or even worse conclusions) without violating some intuitively very convincing condition (see, e.g., Arrhenius 2000, 2011). The question as to how the Repugnant Conclusion should be dealt with and, more generally, what it shows about the nature of ethics has turned it into one of the cardinal challenges of modern ethics.

Recently, Parfit (2014) has suggested a new way of avoiding the Repugnant Conclusion by revising our beliefs about fundamental axiological concepts such as “better than” and “equally good”. Normally, we think that these concepts are transitive so that if A is a better outcome than B, and B is better than C, then A is better than C (and if A is equally as good as B, and B is equally as good as C, then A is equally as good as C). Parfit suggests that this is not true in a range of important cases. Rather, in such cases, outcomes are only imprecisely comparable. One defining feature of imprecise concepts is that they are non-transitive. This is not due to any cognitive or epistemic limitations but a fact about the value comparisons of certain types of outcomes.

More specifically, Parfit (2014) suggests that “[w]hen two possible worlds would contain different numbers of people, this fact makes these worlds less precisely comparable.” From this follows that many of the comparisons of different future populations will involve imprecise comparisons and transitivity might fail. Parfit thinks that this will open up a way of avoiding the Repugnant Conclusion without implying other counterintuitive conclusion, and thus solve one of the major challenges in ethics. In my talk, I shall try to clarify Parfit’s proposal and evaluate whether it will help us with the paradoxes in population ethics.

References

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