24.06J / STS.006J Bioethics
Spring 2009

Bioethics Session 13 Handout: Non-Identity II

Sometimes, by behaving in a certain way, we cause bad things to happen to people who would not have existed if we had not behaved that way. For example, by ignoring her doctor's advice Mary causes Mariette to be born with hemophilia, but Mariette would (most probably) not have existed had Mary heeded her doctors advice. The 'non-identity problem' is the problem of what to say about cases like this.

The problem can be presented as a kind of *paradox*. A paradox is a valid argument whose premises seem plausible, but whose conclusion is absurd or self-contradictory. Here are some famous paradoxes:

The Paradox of the Heap

P1   Two grains of sand, piled together, do not make a heap.
P2   For any n, if n grains of sand, piled together, do not make a heap, then $n+1$ grains of sand, piled together, do not make a heap.
P3   A billion grains of sand, piled together, make a heap.

C   A billion grains of sand, piled together, do not make a heap, and do make a heap.

The Liar Paradox

Sentence S: 'It is not the case that S is true'

P1   Either (i) S is true or (ii) it is not the case that S is true.
P2   If (i) then S is true and it is not the case that S is true.
P3   If (ii) then S is true and it is not the case that S is true.

C   S is true and it is not the case that S is true.

The Non-Identity Paradox

P1   If you don't harm anybody, then you don't do anything wrong.
P2   Mary doesn't harm anybody.
P3   Mary does something wrong.

C   Mary does and doesn't do something wrong.

Which premise must go?
The problem with rejecting P3 is that it seems to commit us to the view that we almost never do wrong by causing bad things to happen to future generations.
The problem with rejecting P2 is just that Mariette doesn't seem to be harmed by Mary.
So, says Parfit, we must reject P1.