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Possible People

5.1 Can we have duties to people who will never actually exist? That the answer is 'No' has seemed obvious to many writers. I shall be arguing to the contrary that, where we have a choice between bringing someone into existence and not doing so, the interests of that possible person have to be considered. The question has an obvious relevance to such topics as abortion, embryo experimentation, and above all population policy, which will be the main subject of this paper. I discuss the other two topics on similar lines elsewhere in this volume.

It is clear that, for a utilitarian of the older sort who puts his theory in terms of maximizing happiness, the interests of possible people have to be considered; for, other things being equal, to bring into being such people, given that they will be happy, increases the sum of happiness. It is not so clear that the same is true for a version of the sort that is nowadays more commonly favoured, which interprets the utility that has to be maximized as the satisfaction of preferences. For it might be held that if the people in question do not yet exist, they have no preferences yet which we could have a duty to satisfy. I do not myself accept this view, for reasons which will become apparent when I have shown how the contrary view follows from the deeper theory about moral reasoning that I have advocated in *MT*. And whether or not this theory be accepted, it certainly looks as if, by bringing into being people who, when in being, will have preferences which are satisfied, we do increase preference-satisfaction (6.1 ff., 7.9, 8.6, 10.4, 11.3).

Nor is this a problem only for utilitarians. Derek Parfit (1986), from whom I have obviously learnt so much, argues, not on a utilitarian basis, but on the basis of intuitions which many people have. As we shall see in a moment when I outline his argument, it could be taken in two ways. If we accept

the intuitions, it could be used to support his 'Repugnant Conclusion'. But it could be used, instead, as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the intuitions themselves.

In any case, the view for which I shall be arguing is not directly contrary to his. For the basis of his argument is only that, for any given population with a given quality of life, it is possible to *conceive* of a higher population with a lower quality of life that is compensated for by the increased numbers enjoying it. By pursuing this line of thought, we can *conceive* of a population vastly increased in size, but with a quality of life for all barely above the level at which life is just worth living. This huge population, by the same sort of compensation, would be as a whole better off than the smaller population we started with.

I do not wish to dispute this. I shall be arguing, rather, that *in practice* enough disutilities would be created by the transition to this end-state, and by the circumstances that would then obtain, to cancel the balance of advantage. The conclusion which most people find repugnant is one about what we ought now to do in our actual situation. To distinguish this conclusion from Parfit's, I shall call it 'the Counter-intuitive Conclusion (CC)'. It is, that we ought now to take steps to increase the population until the end-state, which I have just agreed is conceivable, is actually realized. And when the question is what we ought to do, the distinction between what is conceivable and what is practicable is of the highest importance.

The kind of utilitarianism that I have advocated provides a defensible answer to this practical problem about population policy, as to so many others. But I shall have room only to hint at it, and to show at least that the problem creates in principle no difficulty for a properly formulated utilitarianism. So the first thing to do will be to distinguish various versions of the utilitarian doctrine, and see how the problem is supposed to arise. One way of dividing up kinds of utilitarianism is according to the class of people, or beings, whose utility is to be considered. This may be held to include all sentient beings, or all humans, or all of some more limited class of humans, such as those capable of having a concept of their own self-interest. The distinction I have in mind is of this general sort. It divides up versions of utilitarianism into those which take into account the utility of all people or sentient beings,

whether or not they have or will have actual existence, and those which take into account only that of those people or sentient beings who do or will have actual existence. For short, let us call the first class 'all possible people' and the second class 'all actual people'. The class of those who are or will be possible but not actual let us call 'merely possible people'.

To give an example of what this means: suppose that my wife and I are trying to decide whether to have another child: any child that we might have has no actual existence now, nor will it ever have if we decide not to have any more children: it will then be, or have been, a merely possible person. As is well known, the kind of utilitarianism called *total* utilitarianism bids us take into account the utility of this possible person in making our decision, because any utility which it has will add to the total, and therefore the failure to produce this child may make the total less. On the other hand, the kind of utilitarianism called *average* utilitarianism bids us take into account utilities to possible people only to the extent that they would affect the average utility per life lived. So if the addition of this child to the population, although the child itself gets some positive utility, diminishes the average utility because its utility is less than the pre-existing average, we have a duty not to produce it, according to average utilitarianism (10.7, H 1973: 244 ff. = 1989: 166).

It is also generally accepted that there is a difference in the prescriptions generated by average and total utilitarianism only in cases where the prescriptions are about bringing into being, or not bringing into being, new persons who would not otherwise have existed. There has been a lot of discussion of this dispute. People have argued for average and against total utilitarianism on the ground that total utilitarianism would give us a duty to increase population to an enormous extent—one which our intuitions do indeed find repugnant. It is easy to understand why people who enjoy a relatively high standard of living should find this counter-intuitive, if it required them to increase the world population until everyone was reduced to the standard of living of the average Indian villager, provided only that the increased numbers of people who enjoyed this decreased average utility were enough to make the total utility greater than it is now.

5.2 I shall go into this problem in greater detail later, and shall try to relate it to our actual circumstances in this world as it is, and not to deal with it in terms of abstract population diagrams as is sometimes done. As we shall see, this may lead us to solutions which escape those who view it only in abstract terms. But first I want to shed more light on the argument by saying why I, in particular, think myself committed by my ethical theory (see *MT*) to the total version of utilitarianism. I am going to explain this, not in terms of utility at all, because that is a difficult concept to handle, but in terms of the underlying ethical theory which bids us ask what universal prescriptions we are prepared to assent to, or in other words what we prefer should happen universally, not giving particular attention to the role that we ourselves are actually to play in the resulting course of events. I hope to show that this Kantian method, like the version of utilitarianism that I have based on it (15.2 and refs., H 1993a), constrains us to give equal weight to the equal preferences of all possible people, whether they are actual or merely possible. Am I then faced with the allegedly counter-intuitive consequences which allegedly follow?

I will start with some points which I also discuss briefly in 6.2; 10.4 ff., and 11.4. But I will put the points entirely in terms of preferences and prescriptions. First, let me ask whether I prefer being, myself, in existence to not being in existence. In other words, given the power to prescribe existence or non-existence for myself, which do I prescribe? Here there is a danger to be avoided. We shall confuse the issue if we allow into it any thought of the 'fear of death' which we all have. This fear is something which we have had built into us by evolution: genes producing a normal amount of this fear had a greater chance of survival than either genes eliminating it altogether or genes imparting such disproportionate amounts of it that their bearers would not on occasion sacrifice their lives to save several carriers of the same gene.

All this, however, is irrelevant to our question, because the so-called 'fear of death' is a fear of *dying*, or, usually, of *being killed*. By contrast, what I am asking is, not whether I prefer remaining alive to dying or being killed, but whether I prefer existing now to never having existed. Since if I had never existed I could not die, the fear of death does not enter into

the question, though it is extremely hard to prevent ourselves being irrelevantly influenced by it.

Some people argue that, once this irrelevancy is put aside, the question itself vanishes. Their reason for saying this is that, since it is impossible for me to *compare* my existence with my non-existence (for I do not know what it is like not to exist), I cannot form any preference between them. Though this argument has been popular, it goes too far (10.8, 11.4). Most of us are thankful for our existence; and what one can be thankful for must surely be something which one prefers to its absence. I am not suggesting that existence is *in itself* a benefit, but only that it is, for those who enjoy life, beneficial as a necessary condition of this.

Suppose that we dramatize the argument by imagining that we can timelessly prescribe to our fathers and mothers, or to God, whether to bring us (or to have brought us) into existence (6.2, 10.4, 11.4). My claim is that, if we have greater than zero happiness (if our lives are at least just worth living) we shall all so prescribe. Here a difficulty arises about the notion of timeless prescription. It is analogous to the notion, which has been thought to create difficulty for my theory, of past-tense prescriptions. I cannot avoid either difficulty, because I want to say that moral judgements are *universal* prescriptions, and time-references, such as a restriction to present and future times, cannot occur in universal sentences as I define 'universal'. Any universal prescription will have some past-tense implicates or logical consequences; and this is indeed in accordance with our ordinary use of words like 'ought' and 'wrong': we say that someone ought *to have* done something, and that what he actually did *was* wrong. If my theory could not deal with such locutions, it would not be a starter.

I must say that this problem does not cause me any loss of sleep (see *LM* 187 ff., H 1979b). I have never claimed that moral judgements are just like ordinary imperatives, which are confined to the future tense. In extending the range of moral prescriptions to cover present and past times, we are merely saying that, if certain things are or were being done, they are or were breaches of the prescription; and I have no difficulty in understanding this. But I shall not have room to go into this here. Assuming for the sake of argument that there can be

universal (and therefore tenseless) and past-tense prescriptions, shall we not most of us (that is, those who are glad that we exist) prescribe that God or our fathers and mothers should have brought us into existence? In other words, do we not *prefer* that they should have?

The universalizability of moral judgements, to which I am committed, requires us to extend this prescription to all similar cases. If, therefore, we are looking for universal prescriptions to cover all procreation-decisions, we shall have to disregard entirely the fact that we ourselves occupy the roles that we do. The principles we adopt will have to cover the procreation of anybody. Can we restrict this by saying that they have to cover only the procreation of people who are actually procreated (that is of actual people)? I think not, for reasons which I have given in *MT* 114 f. Actuality is a property which cannot be defined without bringing in references to individuals, and therefore no such restriction can occur in a properly universal prescription. Or, to use an alternative argument (*ibid.*), any attempt to discriminate morally between actual and possible cases when making moral judgements will run counter to our linguistic intuitions, which allow no such discrimination. If one makes a moral judgement about an actual case, one is committed to making the same judgement about a possible case having the same universal properties.

I have been trying to show why my theory commits me to the view that there can be duties to merely possible people; I shall be defending this view later. Note that I am not required by my theory to accept duties to all possible people whatever their characteristics, or whatever the world is like. I am not, for example, required, when discussing what I ought to do in actual situations, to ask how my actions would affect a possible person who had skin so light-sensitive that drawing back the curtains would be torment to him. I only have to consider the effects of my actions on people who would thereby be affected (including people who would come into existence) in the world as it is. In other words, I have to consider what the consequences of my actions actually would be; but these consequences might include the bringing into existence of a person who otherwise would not exist; and this I have to consider.

It seems to me to follow from all this that, in considering

whether to bring a new person into existence, I have to look at the question as if I were going to be that person, or as if that person were going to be myself. So it would be relevant what, for that person, it would be like to exist; and, of course, what, for him, it would be like not to exist. Granted, I can form no idea of what the second state of affairs would be like *for him*. For it would not be like anything for him. The nearest comparison, perhaps, is with being totally unconscious. But if the first state of affairs—that is to say, his existence—would be moderately agreeable for him, then it seems to me that I am constrained by universalizability to treat this fact as just as relevant to my moral thinking as a similar fact about my own actual existence; and we have seen that most of us have reason to be thankful for our own actual existence.

If, when seeking to maximize preference-satisfactions, I give equal weight to the preferences of such possible people, am I then forced to embrace CC? I am going in what follows to use the word 'utility' instead of the more cumbersome 'satisfaction of preferences'; but it is to be understood in the light of what I have been saying. The argument for CC goes as follows. Let us imagine a world population of a given size (call it x people), enjoying an average utility a ; and call this world the A world. If a is substantially above the level at which life is just worth living, it will always be possible to imagine another world B in which the *average* utility is b (where b is less than a), but in which the *total* utility is greater, because the population (call it y) has increased to compensate. So it is *theoretically* always possible to increase total utility by increasing total population sufficiently, even if the effect is to reduce average utility to near zero, provided only that it is positive (i.e. to produce a state in which on average the members of the population only just prefer existence to non-existence). Each of them may have extremely little to be thankful for, but between them they have more to be thankful for than the inhabitants of world A . According to CC we have a duty to try to bring about this state (call it Z) by increasing the population vastly (6.3, 10.7, 11.8).

5.3 I have several arguments against CC. Most of them depend on asking how, in practice, one could get from world A to world Z without thereby introducing more disutility than

would be compensated for by the increased utility. But first let me suggest an argument which does not depend, or not so much, on practical considerations. Let us imagine we are actually living in the lap of luxury (as, relatively speaking, I and most of my readers are). Even so, it will be open to us, if we want to resist CC, to do so by claiming that on average even our life is only just above the critical point at which we stop preferring to exist. This claim will appear at first sight absurd; but I hope to deepen our understanding of what is valuable and not valuable in life by asking what truth there is in it, and by how much our life would have to deteriorate before the claim became not absurd at all.

In Britain one of our greatest blessings is abundance of space to move around in. Americans, Australians, and many other peoples are, indeed, more fortunate still; and so, in *this* respect if not in many others, are the inhabitants of the Sahara. I myself do value tremendously my liberty to walk in the English countryside on public footpaths, or in the national and other parks when in America.

Now it might come to be the case, and probably will, that by intensive methods, not of animal husbandry (for I do not mind in the least going without meat—see 15.1 ff.) but of crop-production, the countryside can be dispensed with; all our food can be grown in factories in a very small space. Then an enormous increase in population will become possible within a given area. I have heard it said that, allowing one square metre ground area per person, the entire present population of the world could be accommodated within the state of Delaware. At such a density, America or Australia, or even Britain, could hold an astronomical population, by becoming one vast city with people living in tower blocks so designed and placed as to give them just sufficient light and air for their physical health (a series of huge *Unités-d'Habitation*). It is open to us to say that, if that happened, existence would not be worth having. And there are other things that make us value space; one is the ability to get away from our neighbours. Even in the case of seagulls, who cram themselves into an available habitat, an increase in numbers beyond a certain point leads to outbreaks of aggression; and there are mechanisms, genetically implanted, which prevent this happening,

mostly to do with the preservation by each mating pair of its own territory. The same sort of thing happens with many species, and I suspect that it happens with humans.

So, if a proponent of CC is going to topple the opposition, he will have to get the opposition to accept that life really will be worth living in world Z. And it is difficult to see how he is going to do this. What makes our life worth living is a very difficult thing to decide, and something that everyone has to decide for himself. I will give examples from my own experience. The times at which I have been unhappiest were not times at which I was materially ill-provided for—quite the reverse. They were times at which I had been bereaved, or at which one or other of my children was doing things I was sure they would regret. At such times I even got near wishing that I did not exist.

But, more to the point, when I was a prisoner of war in the Far East (15.1), the conditions under which we lived could be divided into two phases. In one of them we lived in camps in Singapore, having malaria from time to time, and so little to eat that when I got out I put on 30 pounds in a month to get back to my pre-war normal weight of 150 pounds. Our calorie intake was well below the internationally accepted minimum. But we did grow vegetables (otherwise we should have actually starved), and had interesting and pleasant talk with one another; indeed, we got on very well with one another in the group I was lucky to belong to. The Japanese left us more or less to ourselves and the climate was ideal. So, although I would *prefer*, if I had to live by subsistence horticulture, to be a smallholder in, say, Malaya or Jamaica, I could not possibly claim that our life was not worth living. On the other hand, during the time when we were working as slaves on the Burma Railway, I would claim this, apart from the hope of eventually getting out that sustained us. I think that, faced with the prospect of such an existence prolonged throughout my life, I would prefer not to exist. But it is hard to be sure.

What does this show us? I think it shows that there is a limit below which non-existence becomes preferable, and that it is a highly subjective matter where this limit will lie for any particular person. I am not sure that the proponents of CC will find it easy, if they limit themselves to considering states of life

which are concretely possible, to secure agreement that the average level of utility which we have a duty to go down to by increasing the population is so low as to make the conclusion all that counter-intuitive.

To take my own case: if the proponent of CC says that by my own confession I am compelled to agree that we have a duty to increase the population until we are all in the condition of the prisoners in Singapore with our vegetable gardens, but not until we are in that of those on the Burma Railway, I may reply that I do not necessarily find *that* conclusion so repugnant (this is because I have experienced both conditions), but that I cannot speak for other people, who have not had the experience, and perhaps find it impossible even to imagine it, and if they did experience it might react to it very differently from me. I know that many of my fellow-prisoners did react very differently.

To put the point in a somewhat more sophisticated way: everyone has his (or her) own scale of preferences, and it will differ from person to person how great a decline in material conditions is required to bring them to the break-even point above which life is just worth living. This enables a determined opponent of CC to claim that so far as he is concerned they cannot decline very much before he reaches this point, and to claim further that there are enough people like him to soften, at least, its counter-intuitiveness. However, I should not be content with this argument. Its weakness, like that of the original argument which it seeks to refute, is that it looks at things in too static terms. It considers possible *states* of the world, but does not consider the *process of transition* between them, which may have its own disutilities.

5.4 It is true in general that the thing that causes us most distress is the transition from a relatively happy to a relatively unhappy state of life. When I was put into prison, that was terrible, even though it was a relief not to be being shot at any longer in that most unpleasant and demoralizing battle. But once I was in the bag and got used to it, it was not so bad. By contrast, the day on which it became certain that we would be released was one of the happiest days of my life. The proponent of CC has the problem of showing that the *transition* to $\mathcal{Z}$ will not introduce disutilities that will more than cancel out the

improved total utility in the state itself once achieved. Suppose that one could introduce state $\mathcal{Z}$ just by waving a wand, and everybody at once forgot what they had been before, then it would be easier; but history does not operate like that.

It will not do to say, as some do, that, by assuming a sufficiently *gradual* transition, the disutility of the transition itself can be made to vanish. For, since people will still be able to compare their state with that of the Golden Age several generations before, they will regret the transition, and that will cause them pain. And, secondly, the gradualization of the process of transition will have the effect that the achievement of state $\mathcal{Z}$ will be postponed into such a remote and unpredictable future as no longer to be a sensible object of policy. This is relevant, if the question facing us is what we ought to be actually doing now.

Still, let us suppose the next best thing. Suppose that we are able, by starting now, to put all our children born from now on into training centres, or even just to treat them rough at home, so that, by continuing this process for the many generations which will in any case be needed to bring population up to the desired level, we shall eventually get our descendants of many generations hence well acclimatized to the new conditions. Even this process may generate some disutilities: we have to find a way, for example, of preventing there being a highly acrimonious generation gap, as the children come to envy the standard of living of their parents which they, the children, are never going to be allowed to reach. Here again, however, I find myself inclined to say that *if* it were possible, and the children were well prepared, I do not find the conclusion necessarily counter-intuitive. People have found happiness in communes and monasteries approximating to the conditions we are envisaging. What most repels me about such a suggestion is something I have not mentioned yet: we should be taking away the possibility of people leading *different* lives from each other (as it was to a large extent taken away from us in Singapore, because we all had to do much the same things in order to survive). If allowance is made for this, perhaps we shall be led, in order to avoid intolerable uniformity in society and make possible the variety of life-styles which is the spice of our existence, to raise the level of the break-even point a bit.

5.5 However, the most powerful argument against CC is yet to come. Consider again world *A*. I said that the *average* utility over the whole of its population was *a*. But how was this utility distributed? I have given reasons elsewhere (14.1, H 1978, *MT* ch. 9) for saying that, with a given population and a given amount of material wealth, the distribution of the wealth that maximized utility would be moderately but not absolutely equal. The reasons why it would be moderately equal had to do with diminishing marginal utility and with the disutility of occasioning envy. The reasons why it would not be absolutely equal were also the usual ones: principally the need for incentives to get people to give of their best; and also the value to society of having some people who are well enough off to turn around and do things which benefit society in general, like practising and supporting the arts, but which could not be done by everybody in a society unless it were pretty affluent.

It is of course going to be irrelevant to the present argument to say that if the society *were* affluent enough, everybody in it could equally be in a position to perform this function, and so wealth could be distributed equally. It will be irrelevant, because we are precisely discussing a change to a very much less affluent society in which this will not be so. The first effect of the change from the world *A* to world *Z* would be to destroy this possibility of equally distributed affluence, and impose on us the necessity of either allowing some privileges or else forgoing the flowers of civilization. Whatever may happen in the future, neither Renaissance Italy nor fifth-century Athens would have been possible without gross inequalities.

Let us suppose, then, leaving this irrelevant consideration on one side, that in world *A* wealth (and therefore utility, though the two have of course to be distinguished) is, to some moderate, though not enormous, extent, unequally distributed. Let us then examine the transition to world *Z*. It can come about in two ways. In world *Z* average utility *z* is just enough to make life worth living. But this says nothing about the distribution of the utility. So it is possible either (1) to have an equal distribution in world *Z*, or (2) to have an unequal distribution. In the latter case a lot of people's lives will not be worth living. Let us consider this possibility first. What is going to be the effect on society of containing these submerged members?

If they are rational and overcome the fear of death, they will all commit suicide. But this will be bad for the proponent of CC, because it will reduce the population again, just when he has been at such pains to increase it. He increased it to increase utility; but a side-effect was to produce a lot of people who had so much disutility in their lives that they chose to opt out: so the level of utility was only restored by undoing his work. In practice, no doubt, the disutility of the suicide process would be considerable, involving as it would overcoming the fear of death. So he would have done better not to produce these people in the first place. But if he resolves not to produce them, then he has the problem of how to raise the population to the optimum, at the cost of decreasing average utility to the minimum level that just makes life worth living, without thereby producing a lot of people who are below this level.

More probably the people below the line will rebel if they are able. That will land us in a civil war, whose disutility will take away all our gains. If the war results in the institution of an absolutely equal society, that will be a reversion to case (1), which we shall be looking at in a moment. If, as is more likely, it merely results in a redistribution of inequalities, so that again our society has a submerged portion (only with different people in it) which is below the level at which life is just worth living, we shall be back at square one, and the process will begin all over again. If the better off manage to institute repressive measures to prevent those below the line from rebelling, the disutility of the measures both to the repressed and to their oppressors will be great; we shall in fact have a slave society, the disutility of which I hope I have demonstrated in H 1979a. Note that, even independently of the present argument, the juxtaposition of penury and wealth is going to create great disutilities from various kinds of disaffection; so that the length to which we can take CC is again greatly reduced.

The upshot is that any attempt to increase utility by increasing population to the point at which the average life is just worth living will founder, unless the distribution of utility in the new society is absolutely equal; if it is not, those who fall below the break-even point will cause enough trouble, one way or another, to cancel out the gains. So the possibility of actually realizing the utopia of CC will depend on creating a

society in which everybody has an absolutely equal share of the utility, at the minimal level just above the break-even point. Extreme egalitarians will be pleased with this result; but that is not the point at issue. Before they become too pleased, I want to show that this outcome is of no use to the proponent of CC.

Forgetting for a moment about population increases, consider first a population of fixed size. There must be a distribution, whether equal or more or less unequal, at which utility is maximized (I neglect for simplicity the possibility of alternative maxima). Any attempt to make the distribution more equal than this will lessen average, and also total, utility (assuming, as we are, a fixed population). Suppose that in our world *A* this ideal distribution has been realized, and that we then go on to consider the further question of whether the population should be increased in order to increase total utility, in the way that CC prescribes. But if the distribution was optimal before the increase in population, this cannot be done by having greater equality. It can only be done by lowering the average, but retaining the existing more or less unequal distribution. So, if we go on increasing the population by steps, at the same time decreasing the average utility but increasing the total utility, the point will eventually be reached at which the lowest segment of the population has lives not worth living. This is the limit to the process, because, as we saw, the existence of any substantial number of people in this condition will produce disutilities (mass suicide, rebellion, or slavery) which will cancel out the gains.

I have no wish to suggest that this limit will be reached at anywhere near present standards of affluence. The proponents of CC could well insist that, given greater equality than we have at the moment, the population could be increased substantially without producing these dire results. It is true that the other obstacles in the way of CC that I mentioned earlier will have to be taken account of, and their effect will be to raise the level that we shall reach, in our process of increasing population and decreasing average utility, before we get to the point at which disutilities start to cancel out the gains. But, leaving that aside, how are we to calculate this limit? I am no mathematician, so I cannot do it in detail and exactly; and in

any case it depends on many imponderable factors about people's preferences. But I should guess that, given that the inequalities which are inevitable in any viable economy are quite large (no Eastern European country, nor even Maoist China, has got anywhere near absolute equality), and given the other factors I have mentioned, the conclusion we reach is not going to be nearly so counter-intuitive as has been thought.

5.6 What it comes to, in the simplest terms, is this. If we start off with a society which is unequal and affluent and has a small population, we ought, according to my version of utilitarianism, first to get an optimal (i.e. utility-maximizing) distribution among the existing population of the utility which either exists or can be generated by that population. After we have done that, we have to increase the population, thereby diminishing the average but increasing the total utility, without altering its proportionate distribution, except in so far as the optimal distribution becomes different with a different average. We should go on doing this until we reach the point at which the lowest segment of the population comes below the break-even point at which life is just worth living. Then we shall have to stop. Given the inequalities which remain, this will leave the rest of the society's members above this point, and no doubt in many cases well above.

But now we come to the crunch. Consider our existing society in Britain or America or Australia. It is, needless to say, still pretty unequal. There are probably good utilitarian arguments for reducing inequalities further. How much further is a point on which there will be political disagreements, with extreme right-wingers saying that we have gone far enough, or even too far, and extreme left-wingers saying that we have hardly begun. Into these disputes I shall not enter. But if we take a middle-of-the-road position on this, is it not bound, even with our present affluence, to leave quite a lot of people who, whether from poverty or from some other cause, have lives barely worth living? I have suggested already that poverty is not the chief cause of misery. There are certainly many such people at the moment; attempts to help them by welfare state methods have not been very successful; I do not myself believe that those or any other methods will cause there no longer to be such a segment of our population. It is a most intractable

problem. Their existence is a great disutility not only to themselves but also to society as a whole, which has to do its best to look after them. Might it not be argued, therefore, that we have reached the limit already: if we increase the population and decrease the average affluence, we shall inevitably be increasing the proportion of our population which is below the line?

That is probably too extreme a view. I could envisage some, perhaps a considerable, increase of population in Britain or America or Australia which would not create an intolerable problem of poverty for some, because the distribution in those societies remains very unequal, and if inequalities were reduced a bit, the numbers could with advantage go up. But once that had been done, the scope for increased population would probably be rather small, and CC would not after all be so counter-intuitive. It would be simply what any moderate egalitarian who wanted to make best use of the available resources would wish us to do.

In conclusion, I must add that for the sake of brevity I have made two gross oversimplifications. First, I have been confining myself to the position in Britain, America, and Australia. Obviously any thorough examination of the problem would have to look at the world as a whole. But then we should have to go into the extremely intractable problem of the just distribution of wealth between nations, about which I said a very little, but not enough, in *MT* ch. 11. Secondly, although at the beginning I spoke of sentient creatures, I have thereafter considered only the population of humans. A defensible population policy would have to take account of the interests of sentient non-human animals. But to formulate this, we should have to make very difficult judgements about the relative quality of life of humans and other animals in the circumstances that alternative policies would produce. This problem I thought too intractable for brief discussion in this paper (15.6, H 1987*b*). It could be that leaving room for the right numbers of animals in each species, whatever those are, would reduce the amount of land available for humans. I have no wish to make light of these difficulties; but I think that my treatment of the problem within the limits of single countries and of the human species has done something to show that CC, as an

argument against total utilitarianism, is not very powerful. And, since CC and similar arguments are often used in discussions of our duties to foetuses and embryos, it is helpful to show that utilitarian approaches to those issues are not successfully impugned by it.