

## The Worseness of Nonexistence

*By Theron Pummer*

We are often forced to make tradeoffs between the well-being of persons who will exist independently of what we choose and that of merely possible persons. Such forced tradeoffs occur in the contexts of procreation, resource conservation, climate change, and public health. For example, should the *Global Burden of Disease*,<sup>1</sup> used for priority setting in public health, take into account years of good life lost by *never existing*, in addition to years of good life lost by *premature death*? Should it, other things equal, give equal weight to these two ways of failing to have more years of good life?<sup>2</sup> Should reducing *existential risks*, i.e., risks of everyone on the planet being destroyed, be a top priority?<sup>3</sup> A greater priority than fighting global poverty? How we should answer these monumentally important practical questions depends in large part on whether (and if so, to what extent) we should give priority to independently existing persons over merely possible persons. In this chapter I argue that the standard basis for deprioritizing merely possible persons – that things cannot be better or worse for them – faces serious problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Murray et al. 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See Hutchinson (this volume) on extending lives versus creating lives.

<sup>3</sup> See Bostrom 2013.

## 1. Worse For and Worse

Possible states of affairs can be *better* or *worse*, from an impartial, or agent-neutral, perspective. Suppose that in one possible state of affairs, you enjoy an ice cream cone, and, for some unrelated reason and unbeknownst to you, five distant people suffer intense pain and die. In a second possible state of affairs, things unfold neutrally for you and for these others. All other things are equal. While the first possible state of affairs may be better *for you* than the second, the first possible state of affairs seems all things considered worse than the second from an impartial perspective. Or, as I will more simply say, the first possible state of affairs seems *worse*.

*Well-being* refers to *non-derivative goodness for people*, and a life's *well-being level* refers to the quantity of such goodness there is in this life. Intuitively, many different sorts of things are capable of contributing positively to well-being: pleasure, desire satisfaction, knowledge, friendship, moral virtue, and so on. Some things seem capable of contributing negatively: pain, and perhaps illness, desire frustration, and moral vice too.<sup>4</sup> I will refer to a span of life between times  $t_1$  and  $t_2$  with a net positive well-being level as *good life*.

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<sup>4</sup> For an introduction to well-being, see Crisp 2015. According to *Hedonism*, only pleasure and pain contribute (positively and negatively respectively) to well-being; according to *Desire Satisfaction Views*, only desire satisfaction and frustration contribute to well-being; according to *Objective List Views*, many of the various things listed above contribute to well-being independently of whether they are pleasurable or desired. I have defined well-being in

I will understand the *death* of a person to be the ceasing to exist of this person. Suppose Jane accidentally steps out in front of a bus. Jane is struck by the bus and dies instantly. If she had not died when she did, she would have had another 80 years of good life. The *nonexistence* of a person differs from the death of a person in that it is not the *ceasing* to exist, but the *never existing*, of a person. Suppose Lucy never actually exists, but that if Jill and Jack had had intercourse at 11:39pm on June 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016 in some highly specific way, Lucy would have existed and had 80 years of good life. Jane is an actual person, who died. Lucy is a merely possible person, who never actually existed.

Most of us are prepared to say that the possible state of affairs in which Jane dies is worse for her than the possible state of affairs in which she has another 80 years of good life. Is the possible state of affairs in which Lucy never exists worse *for her* than the possible state of affairs in which she has 80 years of good life? Some are inclined to answer “yes,” and accept:

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terms of *people* merely for convenience; I think it is clear that the concept can also apply to sentient non-persons, e.g., to chickens.

*Comparativism*: Possible states of affairs in which person *S* exists can be better or worse for *S* than possible states of affairs in which *S* does not exist.<sup>5</sup>

A simple argument for Comparativism builds from the intuition that those who live good lives have reason to be glad they exist rather than not, and claims the best explanation of this is that existing with good lives is better for them than never existing. Such arguments are controversial and have failed to defeat incredulous stares from those who deny Comparativism and thereby accept *Non-Comparativism*.<sup>6</sup> Many are strongly attracted to the thought that, in order for a possible state of affairs to be better or worse for *S* than another, *S* must exist in both possible states of affairs under comparison. As discussed in section 6 below, many find it incoherent to deny Non-Comparativism.

Comparativism and Non-Comparativism are about betterness *for* (worseness *for*). There is a family of views that links betterness for (worseness for) to *betterness* (worseness). These are

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<sup>5</sup> Proponents of Comparativism include: Hare 1975, Roberts 2003, Fleurbaey and Voorhoeve 2015, and Cusbert & Greaves (unpublished manuscript). In footnote 29 below, I discuss *Limited Comparativism*.

<sup>6</sup> Proponents of Non-Comparativism include: Parfit 1984, Broome 1999, Bykvist 2007, and Bader (unpublished manuscript B). Bader argues that the intuition that those who live good lives have reason to be glad they exist rather than not is easily confused with the intuition that they have reason to be glad they are still alive rather than having died much earlier.

*Person-Affecting Views*.<sup>7</sup> According to a *Strong Person-Affecting View*, if possible state of affairs A is better (worse) than possible state of affairs B, then A is better (worse) *for* at least one person than B. Suppose we combine this Strong Person-Affecting View with Non-Comparativism. Together these views imply that, all else equal, the possible state of affairs in which Lucy never exists is not worse than the possible state of affairs in which she has 80 years of good life. Non-Comparativism implies that the first possible state of affairs is not worse for Lucy, and the Strong Person-Affecting View implies that, given that the first possible state of affairs is not worse for Lucy, and all else is equal, it is not worse.

Many accept Non-Comparativism but reject the Strong Person-Affecting View, allowing that the state of affairs in which Lucy never exists is indeed worse than the possible state of affairs in which she has 80 years of good life, even though it is not worse for her.<sup>8</sup> We could still more modestly maintain a *Weak Person-Affecting View*, according to which there is *some* special significance for the betterness (worseness) of possible states of affairs, of them being better (worse) *for* particular people. There are many possible such views. On one such view, the degree to which the state of affairs in which Jane dies is worse than the state of affairs in which she has another 80 years of good life is *greater* than the degree to which the state of affairs in which Lucy never exists is worse than the state of affairs in which she

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<sup>7</sup> Narveson 1967 is one of the first to defend a Person-Affecting View. For more recent discussions, see: Arrhenius 2003, Roberts 2011, Temkin 2012, Ross 2015, and Bader (unpublished manuscript A).

<sup>8</sup> E.g., Parfit 1984 and Broome 2004.

has 80 years of good life. There is a greater degree of worseness in the former case, one might claim, because it involves worseness for a particular person, whereas the latter case does not.

Assuming Non-Comparativism, the Strong Person-Affecting View entails that it would not be better if there were trillions more very good lives, at no expense to those of us who would exist independently, and Weak Person-Affecting Views give at least *some* greater priority to independently existing persons over merely possible persons. Many deny these claims, arguing that possible states of affairs are better insofar as they contain more good life, regardless of whether this extra good life is better *for* anyone.

The greater priority given by Person-Affecting Views to independently existing persons over merely possible persons hinges on the claim that things can be better or worse *for* the former, but not the latter. If Comparativism were true, then there would be no such basis for giving less priority to merely possible persons.<sup>9</sup> Though defenders of Person-Affecting Views and their opponents may still disagree in theory, they could arrive at the same answers to many of the monumentally important practical questions noted at the beginning of the chapter.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> There are further possibly relevant issues concerning whether greater priority should be given to identified persons over merely statistical persons (see Hare 2012 and 2013).

<sup>10</sup> Roberts 2011 is an exception in that she defends Comparativism, and thus agrees that never existing can be worse for the never existing, but she claims that this worseness for

In what follows, I will offer a new argument for Comparativism. My argument builds from assumptions about the metaphysics of persons, to which I now turn.

## 2. The Metaphysics of Persons

In focusing on the metaphysics of *persons*, I intend to concentrate on the metaphysics of what *we* essentially are, whether or not we are essentially persons. Some candidates for what we essentially are include human organism, brain, capacity for consciousness, person, nonphysical soul, or some combination of these.<sup>11</sup> For simplicity, let “person” refer to whatever sort of thing we essentially are. Let *x* refer to a thing (or collection of things) that could be a person, in that it would be if it were appropriately modified. A lump of clay, for example, would be a statue if it took on the right shape. (It may be more accurate to say that an *x* could *constitute* a person, but I will carry on with simpler “be” language.)

According to *Reductionism*, whether a thing *x* is a person is determined solely by various other facts, namely whether *x* possesses various properties, such as the properties of being self-aware, being rational, or being a living organism. In saying that whether *x* is a person is

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does not *matter* morally. I cannot adequately discuss Roberts’s view here; see Frick (unpublished manuscript) for criticisms.

<sup>11</sup> For some competing views about what sort of thing we essentially are, see Thomson 1997, Olson 1997, McMahan 2002, and Parfit 2012.

determined solely by other facts, I mean that the fact of whether  $x$  is a person consists wholly in various *impersonal* facts. On Reductionism so understood, we could give a complete description of reality without making any reference to persons.<sup>12</sup> Reductionism seems a defensible metaphysical view.

According to *Gradability*, we essentially are the sort of thing that an  $x$  being *this* sort of thing at least in part requires  $x$  possessing some finely gradable property P to a sufficient degree.<sup>13</sup> Assuming all other conditions on an  $x$  being a person are met, then, whether the  $x$  is a person is determined solely by whether it possesses P to a sufficient degree. Perhaps in order to be a person, a thing must possess or exercise certain psychological capacities to a sufficient degree.<sup>14</sup> Gradability seems another defensible metaphysical view. Reductionism and Gradability together support:

*Fragility of Existence:* In some cases whether  $x$  is a person is determined solely by whether it possesses property P to a slightly greater degree. The nonevaluative difference between the possible state of affairs in which  $x$  is a person and the possible state of affairs in which  $x$  is not a person can be

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<sup>12</sup> See Parfit 1984.

<sup>13</sup> Gradability thus seems inconsistent with the view that we are essentially nonphysical souls.

<sup>14</sup> Being a human organism or a brain also in part require possessing finely gradable properties to sufficient degrees.

slight, when the difference in the degree to which  $x$  possesses property P is slight.<sup>15</sup>

One might object that the nonevaluative difference between being a person and not cannot be slight. Although normally the nonevaluative difference between being a person and not is large, it is slight in many of the cases I explore here, as in these cases this difference consists wholly in a slight difference in the possession of property P. In these cases, a slight increase in P would not trigger any metaphysical emergence beyond the fact that  $x$  is a person (which is wholly reducible to impersonal facts, according to Reductionism). Similarly, if whether a collection of grains of sand is a heap *were* sometimes determined solely by whether it contains one more grain, this difference between being a heap and not would consist wholly in this slight difference in grains.

One might next object that, just as a difference of one grain of sand cannot plausibly make the difference between being a heap and not, a slight difference in property P cannot plausibly make the difference between being a person and not. We might invoke *indeterminacy* in order to “tolerate” the slight former differences without them making the corresponding latter differences. I will return to this in section 5.

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<sup>15</sup> This claim is consistent with what Hare 2013 calls *Personal Essence is not Perfectly Fragile*.

Barring indeterminacy, Reductionism and Gradability support Fragility of Existence. I cannot here present the arguments for metaphysical views like Reductionism and Gradability, which together enable Fragility of Existence. But such views seem plausible enough and are taken seriously enough by philosophers,<sup>16</sup> that it is surely worthwhile investigating what ethical implications they might have.

### **3. Death and Deprivation**

Recall Jane's death. She is struck by a bus and dies instantly; if she had not died when she did, she would have had another 80 years of good life. Jane's death could positively or negatively impact others. Her failing students could, rather callously, be relieved by her death. Her children could grieve her death. But suppose none of this is the case; assume instead that Jane's death is neutral for everyone else. Then, whether Jane's death is worse seems to depend on its positive or negative impact for her, particularly, whether it is better or worse for her. According to

*Weak Deprivationism*: One thing that makes death worse (better) for the particular person who dies is that it deprives this person of good (bad) life she otherwise would have had.<sup>17</sup> Even in the absence of other factors (e.g., desire

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<sup>16</sup> E.g., Parfit 1984 and the many philosophers influenced by his views on personal identity.

<sup>17</sup> See Nagel 1970, Bradley 2009, Kagan 2012, and Solberg (this volume).

frustration), death can be worse for the particular person who dies, in virtue of deprivation of good life.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, even supposing that (for whatever reason) Jane presently lacks the desire for continued existence, and would not be very psychologically connected to her future self,<sup>19</sup> her death is worse for her given that it deprives her of 80 years of good life. Weak Deprivationism seems a plausible view, but I will not defend it here. As a supplement to Weak Deprivationism, I will assume:

*Unbounded Worseness:* The worseness of death for the particular person who dies has no upper limit, and can, other things equal, grow boundlessly as the amount of good life death deprives this person of grows boundlessly.

That is, other things equal, the degree to which Jane's death is worse for her would have been greater if she were deprived of 180 years of good life, rather than 80, and *much* greater if she were deprived of 1,080 years of good life, rather than 80. As the amount of good life

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<sup>18</sup> There are some radical views according to which the worseness of death for the particular person who dies depends *only* on certain desires at the time of death; these views are incompatible with Weak Deprivationism. But as Timmerman 2016 argues these radical views face serious difficulties.

<sup>19</sup> On the importance of psychological connectedness, see McMahan 2002 and his chapter in this volume.

she is deprived of increases boundlessly, the degree to which her death is worse for her would increase without approaching any upper limit. Many find Unbounded Worseness plausible, though it is more controversial than Weak Deprivationism.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4. The Fine Line between Death and Nonexistence

I am now in a position to present my argument for Comparativism. Compare the following two scenarios, which differ only in the particular ways specified here:

*Death:* In possible state of affairs (A), thing  $x$  is around for just a second, and is destroyed at  $t_0$ . For this second, thing  $x$  meets all the conditions on being a person, and just barely has a sufficient degree of property P.<sup>21</sup> In possible state of affairs (B), things are exactly as they are in (A), except at and after  $t_0$  this  $x$  which is a person, call her Lucy, has plenty more than the sufficient degree of property P, and has 80 years of good life, dying at  $t_{80}$ . (A) is actual. All other things are equal.

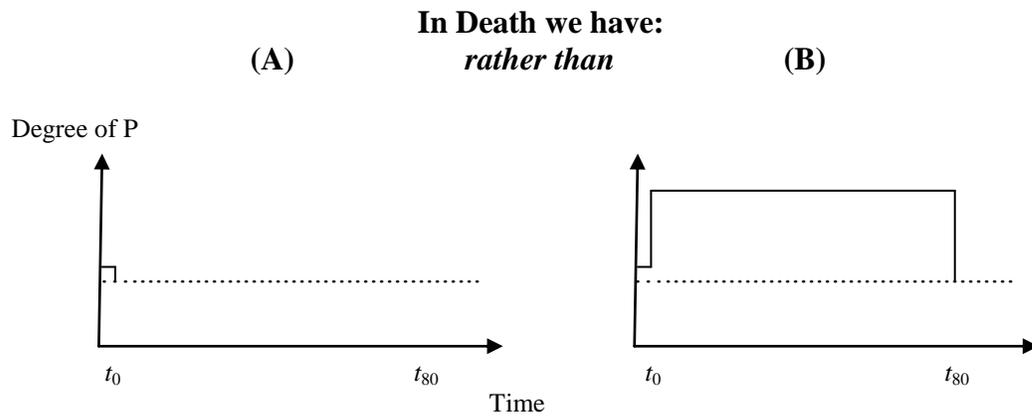
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<sup>20</sup> Williams 1978 and Kagan 2012 can be read as skeptics about Unbounded Worseness. I argue for Unbounded Worseness in Pummer (unpublished manuscript A).

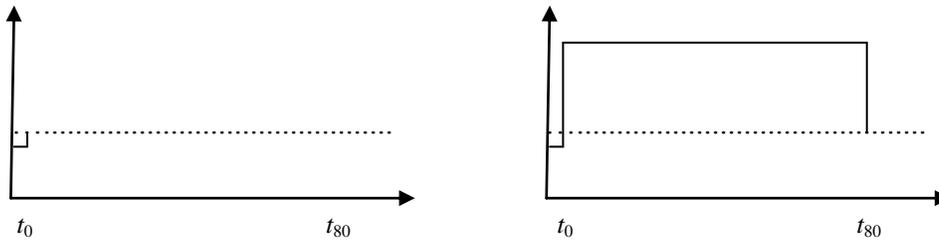
<sup>21</sup> Perhaps one second is not enough for  $x$  to meet all these conditions, but the example can be modified accordingly.

*Nonexistence*: In possible state of affairs (C), thing  $x$  is around for just a second, and is destroyed at  $t_0$ . For this second, thing  $x$  meets all the other conditions on being a person, but just barely fails to have a sufficient degree of property P, and so is not a person. If this  $x$  had slightly more P, then a person, call her Lucy, would exist. In possible state of affairs (D), things are exactly as they are in (C), except at and after  $t_0$  this  $x$  which becomes a person, call her Lucy, has plenty more than the sufficient degree of property P, and has 80 years of good life, dying at  $t_{80}$ . (C) is actual. All other things are equal.

The below diagrams (not to scale) illustrate these two scenarios; the dotted line represents the degree of property P that would be sufficient.



**In Nonexistence we have:**  
**(C) *rather than* (D)**



*Figure 14.1*

According to Weak Deprivationism, Death involves worseness for Lucy, given that (A) is actual and (B) is possible. Lucy is deprived of 80 years of good life. According to Non-Comparativism, it is not the case that Nonexistence involves worseness for Lucy, given that (C) is actual and (D) is possible. Lucy does not exist in (C), so this cannot be worse for her than (D).

Nonetheless, according to Fragility of Existence, the nonevaluative difference between the Death scenario and the Nonexistence scenario is slight. Moreover, we can modify (B) and (D) by making the amount of good life had by Lucy arbitrarily large: 180 years, 1,080 years, etc. According to Unbounded Worseness, we can thereby make the amount of worseness for Lucy in the Death scenario arbitrarily large; of course, according to Non-Comparativism, there would remain no worseness for Lucy in the Nonexistence scenario. Fragility of Existence, Unbounded Worseness, and Non-Comparativism together entail:

*Hypersensitivity*: The evaluative difference between Death and Nonexistence can be arbitrarily large, while the nonevaluative difference between these two scenarios is slight.

But Hypersensitivity seems implausible. Though several people do, not everyone shares my intuition that this form of hypersensitivity of the evaluative to the nonevaluative is implausible. The purpose of this chapter is not to persuade those who do not find Hypersensitivity implausible, but more to explore where consistent *Hypersensitivity avoidance* might lead us.<sup>22</sup>

The rejection of Hypersensitivity entails that we must reject either: Fragility of Existence, Unbounded Worseness, or Non-Comparativism. Thus given Fragility of Existence and Unbounded Worseness, we must reject Non-Comparativism. In particular, we must claim that the Nonexistence scenario involves worseness for Lucy, despite the fact that she exists in only one of the two possible states of affairs compared. So we must embrace Comparativism.

## **5. Indeterminacy**

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<sup>22</sup> I discuss Hypersensitivity in somewhat greater depth in Pummer (unpublished manuscript A).

Recall that, setting aside indeterminacy, Reductionism and Gradability together support Fragility of Existence. Although it is useful to explore things initially while setting aside indeterminacy, it should be noted that it is natural for someone who accepts Reductionism and Gradability *not* to “set aside” indeterminacy, and to instead claim that it is often *indeterminate* whether a thing  $x$  is a person.<sup>23</sup> Note that it is *metaphysical* rather than *epistemic* indeterminacy that is of interest here.<sup>24</sup> It is *facts* about whether  $x$  is a person, nothing to do with our concepts or awareness, which enable the argument in the previous section.

If we accept Reductionism and Gradability, then we may believe that a slight difference in the degree to which property P is possessed could not make the difference between  $x$  determinately being a person and  $x$  determinately not being a person. Suppose we start from a case in which  $x$  possesses enough P such that it is determinate that it is a person, and consider a series of cases each in which  $x$  possesses slightly less and less P until we reach a case in which  $x$  possesses so little P that it is determinate that it is not a person. For a range of cases in the middle of the series it is indeterminate whether  $x$  is a person.

Consistent with these claims, it is a plausible view about the metaphysics of indeterminacy that at least some differences in the degree to which property P is possessed make it *indeterminate* whether the difference between being a person and not is made (or at least

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<sup>23</sup> See, e.g., Parfit 1984.

<sup>24</sup> See Barnes 2014.

make it indeterminate whether it is indeterminate whether the difference between being a person and not is made, etc.). For if each slight difference in the degree to which property P is possessed determinately made *no* difference to whether *x* is a person, we would be forced to accept the conclusion that *x* is a person when it is not.

The upshot of this is that if we bring indeterminacy into the picture, Reductionism and Gradability need not entail Fragility of Existence. But they would still entail an *indeterminate analog* of Fragility of Existence, namely that in some cases slight differences in the degree to which property P is possessed by *x* can make it indeterminate whether *x* is a person (there are further analogues for higher-order indeterminacy, which I will not discuss here). We can call this claim *Indeterminate Fragility of Existence*.

Recall that Fragility of Existence implies that the nonevaluative difference between the possible state of affairs in which *x* is a person, and the possible state of affairs in which *x* is not a person can be slight. Coupled with Unbounded Worseness and Non-Comparativism, Fragility of Existence implies that slight nonevaluative differences can make arbitrarily large evaluative differences (Hypersensitivity). Now suppose we replace Fragility of Existence with Indeterminate Fragility of Existence. Coupled with Unbounded Worseness and Non-Comparativism, Indeterminate Fragility of Existence implies

*Indeterminate Hypersensitivity*: It can be indeterminate whether the evaluative difference between Death and Nonexistence is arbitrarily large, while the nonevaluative difference between these two scenarios is slight.

But Indeterminate Hypersensitivity seems roughly as implausible as Hypersensitivity. Unbounded Worseness, Indeterminate Fragility of Existence, and avoidance of Indeterminate Hypersensitivity, together pressure us to reject Non-Comparativism. Thus the argument for Comparativism stands.

I will now very briefly flag three possible replies. The first reply is that my argument against Non-Comparativism is structurally analogous to a sorites argument.<sup>25</sup> Even if it were, I believe *evaluative* sorites arguments are often importantly *substantively* disanalogous to standard sorites arguments.<sup>26</sup> The second reply construes indeterminacy as a matter of degree and argues that the evaluative difference between different possible states of affairs and scenarios smoothly tracks differences in the relevant degrees of indeterminacy. That is, we could claim that the degree to which it is indeterminate whether *x* is a person is in part a function of the degree to which *x* possesses property P, and that evaluative differences ultimately track these differences in degree. This would presumably enable (Indeterminate) Hypersensitivity avoidance. Though it has some advantages, this is a controversial way of thinking about indeterminacy and its evaluative significance.<sup>27</sup> The third possible reply avoids invoking indeterminacy (and so avoids invoking degrees of indeterminacy), but

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<sup>25</sup> See Hyde 2014 and Goodenough 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Pummer (unpublished manuscript B).

<sup>27</sup> For discussions of indeterminacy in ethics, see Wasserman 2012, Williams 2013 and 2014, and Dunaway 2016.

retains the second reply's claim that evaluative differences track differences in the degree to which  $x$  possesses  $P$ . This reply implies that there is some degree of worseness for Lucy in the Nonexistence scenario. Thus, however plausible it is in its own right, it is not a reply that could come to the aid of Non-Comparativism. Moreover, as I argue elsewhere, there is an independent reason to be skeptical that the last two replies will yield independently satisfactory solutions.<sup>28</sup>

## 6. Back to Metaphysics

I have argued that the conjunction of (Indeterminate) Fragility of Existence, Unbounded Worseness, and avoidance of (Indeterminate) Hypersensitivity together pressure us to reject Non-Comparativism, and to accept that a possible state of affairs in which Lucy never exists is worse for her than a possible state of affairs in which she exists with many years of good life (i.e., to accept Comparativism). But most defenders of Non-Comparativism believe their view is true on logical grounds, finding denials of their view to be *incoherent*. Indeed, most accept the following short argument from Broome: “[I]f [Lucy] had never lived at all, there would have been no her for it to be worse for, so it could not have been worse for her.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Pummer (unpublished manuscript A).

<sup>29</sup> The fuller quote (from Broome 1999, p.168): “[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 had lived at all, that would have been worse for her than if she had lived. But if she had never

In response, several authors have conceded that, while Nonexistence is not worse for Lucy, it would have been *good for* Lucy to exist with good life.<sup>30</sup> But insofar as defenders of Person-Affecting Views are (at a minimum) committed to the thought that there is some special significance for the betterness (worseness) of possible states of affairs, of them being better (worse) *for* particular people, possible states of affairs being good (bad) for particular people may not be good enough. That is, these non-comparative notions (“good for” and “bad for”) will at least play a different, and presumably less weighty, role than comparative notions (“better for” and “worse for”) according to defenders of Person-Affecting Views.

Non-concessive responses are available to Comparativists. First, we might reject the orthodox *semantics* for sentences like “(C) is worse for Lucy than (D)” that is assumed by

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lived at all, there would have been no her for it to be worse for, so it could not have been worse for her.” Some authors (Holtug 2001 and Arrhenius and Rabinowicz 2015) reject the conditional in Broome’s second sentence, and accept *Limited Comparativism*, according to which it can be better (worse) for a person to live than never live at all, if she exists in the actual state of affairs, but cannot be better (worse) for a person to live than never live at all, if she does not exist in the actual state of affairs. This is an intriguing proposal, but it is worth noting that my argument against Non-Comparativism is also an argument against Limited Comparativism, as my argument implies that (C) is worse for Lucy than (D), even though (C) is actual and Lucy does not exist in (C).

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Bykvist 2007 and McMahan 2013.

Non-Comparativists. According to this orthodox semantics, the truth of “(C) is worse for Lucy than (D)” requires that the person Lucy exists. We might instead take “Lucy” in such sentences to refer not to a *person*, but to a richly described *life*. In (C), the possible the state of affairs in which the person Lucy does not exist (which is actual), we can take “Lucy” to refer to the “null life,” and we can then say that this is worse than the life lived in (D).<sup>31</sup>

I am attracted to an alternative non-concessive response which adopts a revisionary *metaphysics* while retaining the orthodox semantics. According to this revisionary metaphysics, the person Lucy *exists* in the actual state of affairs (C) as a merely possible person; she exists here, though she does not live a concrete life.<sup>32</sup> The Comparativist could then reply to Broome that even though Lucy lived no concrete life at all in (C), there nonetheless is a “her” for (C) to be worse *for* than (D). Of course, adopting this line would force us to reformulate Comparativism and much of the previous discussion, replacing “exists” with “lives a concrete life” etc.

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<sup>31</sup> Cusbert and Greaves (unpublished manuscript) are developing an account along these lines.

<sup>32</sup> As Cusbert and Greaves (unpublished manuscript) note, there are a number of particular metaphysical views that would supply the Comparativist with the sort of revisionary metaphysics she needs. One example is *Necessitism*, according to which “necessarily everything is necessarily something” (Williamson 2013, the remarks on p.29 are of particular relevance to Comparativism).

Some might offer an incredulous stare at the suggestion that things can be better or worse for merely possible persons, even if they exist. These stares seem misplaced; it was orthodox metaphysics that prevented us from saying (C) is worse for Lucy than (D), in implying there is no Lucy in (C). But we've just rejected orthodox metaphysics. It is true that "Lucy" here refers only to a merely possible person, but I do not see why we cannot say things can be better or worse for merely possible persons.<sup>33</sup> I suspect any persisting intuitions that we cannot are symptoms of continuing to assume, with orthodox metaphysics, that merely possible people do not *exist*. Perhaps the incredulous stares are better aimed at the revisionary metaphysics itself, which is indeed at odds with common sense. But there are powerful independent theoretical reasons for adopting the revisionary metaphysics, and it seems open to Comparativists to argue that the independent plausibility of Comparativism provides a further reason for adopting it.

I lack the space here to fully articulate, much less adequately defend, the non-concessive responses sketched above. But I hope that the independent advantages of Comparativism (particularly those I have highlighted in this chapter) at least suggest there is good reason to explore them further.

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<sup>33</sup> Similarly, I do not see why we cannot say (with Roberts 2003) that merely possible people have zero well-being, in virtue of living "null lives." As Arrhenius and Rabinowicz 2015 (p.429) say in response to Roberts, "Well-being presupposes being," but the revisionary metaphysics yields "being."

Progress in ethics and metaphysics bears on whether (and if so, to what extent) we should give priority to independently existing persons over merely possible persons, which in turn bears on monumentally important practical questions that occur in a variety of contexts, including procreation, resource conservation, climate change, and public health. In this chapter I have shown one way in which such progress might unfold.

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