



## A Reply to Sterba

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I did not, as James Sterba writes, claim to have explained “the asymmetry view.” I claimed that, since my suggested explanation makes it impossible to solve the Paradox of Future Individuals, “we must abandon” one of its essential premises (my p. 152).

Sterba’s main claim is that my suggested explanation “does not so much explain or justify the [asymmetry] view as simply restate it.” Is this so? My explanation assumed (W) that an act cannot be wrong if it will not be bad for any of the people who ever live.<sup>1</sup> Sterba asks why we should not appeal instead to one of my Wide Principles, which are concerned with possible effects on people who might have lived. And he suggests that, since “the only ground” for preferring (W) is that it explains the asymmetry view, (W) cannot explain this view.

There are other grounds for appealing to (W), such as those provided by certain theories about the nature of moral reasoning. On Scanlon’s theory, for example, our fundamental moral motive is “to be able to justify one’s actions to others on grounds that they could not reasonably reject.”<sup>2</sup> We may claim that, on such a theory, an act cannot be wrong unless it will affect someone in a way that cannot be justified—unless there will be some complainant whose complaint cannot be answered. Similarly, Brandt suggests that, by the phrase “is morally wrong,” we should mean “would be prohibited by any moral code which all fully rational persons would tend to support . . . for the society of the agent, if they expected to spend a lifetime in that society.”<sup>3</sup> It seems likely that, on the chosen

1. This assumption combines my Person-affecting Restriction with my Narrow Principle.

2. T. M. Scanlon, “Contractualism and Utilitarianism,” in A. K. Sen and B.A.O. Williams, eds., *Utilitarianism and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 116.

3. R. B. Brandt, *A Theory of the Good and the Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 194.

code, an act would not be wrong if there are no complainants. Similar remarks apply to the moral theories advanced by Gauthier, Harman, Richards, G. R. Grice, and others.<sup>4</sup>

By appealing to such theories we could answer Sterba's objection to my suggested explanation of the asymmetry. But there remains my objection. As I argued, we must abandon the view that an act cannot be wrong if it will be bad for no one.

4. Sterba gives two versions of the claim that, for an act to be wrong, there must be a complainant. According to what he calls "(4a)," an act cannot be wrong unless there is at least one person who could justifiably blame the agent. This claim is trivially true, since a person who acts wrongly could always blame himself. And, since this claim is neutral between all moral views, it does not, as Sterba writes, "support" the view that we have a duty to bring people into existence. According to what Sterba calls "(4b)," an act cannot be wrong unless there is at least one person whom this act unjustifiably harms, or fails to benefit. Sterba suggests that our only ground for appealing to (4b) is to explain the asymmetry. But the writers I have mentioned give us various other grounds for accepting this claim.

Sterba ends by remarking that, once we become convinced that appealing to (4b) cannot explain or justify the asymmetry view, "the only viable alternative does seem to be to find some explanation for the *symmetry* view that can cope with the Repugnant Conclusion" (my emphasis). Why give up so easily? If we find the asymmetry view intuitively plausible, we should try to find some explanation for *this* view that, perhaps when combined with other principles, avoids the Repugnant Conclusion.