

The Non-Identity Problem

by

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ABSTRACT

Some actions are identity affecting, they affect who will exist in the future. Explaining how identity affecting actions can be wrong has been thought to pose a problem, the Non-Identity Problem. The problem is that an identity affecting action could be wrong even though no one would be harmed if it were performed. If no one would be harmed, how can we explain why it is wrong?

The Non-Identity Problem assumes that someone is harmed by an action only if someone would be worse-off if it were performed than they would be if it were not. I defend this assumption, and I argue that harm does not figure in any way into a plausible explanation of wrong-doing in examples of the Non-Identity Problem.

Furthermore, I argue that the Non-Identity Problem is not an anomaly. There are other examples of actions that are wrong even though harm does not figure into any plausible explanation of why they are wrong. I focus on one: the wrong of increasing inequality between people who are equally deserving.

I conclude that harm does not play a role in explaining all wrong actions, nor is harm an especially important consideration that counts against an action.

Consistent with these lessons, I suggest that we think about the wrong done in examples that raise the Non-Identity Problem in the following way: we should ask what the action tells us about the agent's character. I argue that the action reveals to us a defect in the agent's character and an action that is the mark of a defective character is wrong. I identify the defect of character revealed by some of the most troubling examples of wrong-doing as insensitivity to suffering. Insensitivity to suffering can be exhibited to the same degree by an agent who harms someone as by an agent who harms no one.

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