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Recitation 07: The Non-Identity Problem

1. Mary the impatient mother

Mary has a medical condition but wants very much to become pregnant. If she conceives now, she will have an unhealthy child. But if she waits two months and then conceives, she will have a healthy child. Mary is impatient and conceives a child now. This child, Mariette, is unhealthy, but nevertheless has a life worth living (if asked whether she would prefer to have never been born at all, Mariette says 'no').

2. A 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.

This is a valid argument. But the conclusion is contradictory. So we must reject a premise.

3. Rejecting P3: Mary does not do anything wrong.

She may conceive a child now, even though she knows that she will conceive an unhealthy child.

Challenge: explain away the strong intuition that Mary did something wrong.

4. Rejecting P2: Mary does harm someone.

- Option #1: Mary harms Mariette.
- Option #2: Mary harms someone else.

But: *Harming implies making worse off* (Parfit, p. 374). So who was made worse off?

5. Rejecting P1: even if you don't harm anybody, you may still do something wrong.

Challenge: provide an alternative principle that explains the wrongness of Mary's action.

One option:

- *The Same Number Quality Claim* (Parfit, p. 360).

But what about when we have different numbers (as in Risky Policy cases)?

Two options:

- *The Impersonal Total Principle* (Parfit, p. 387).
 - This implies The Repugnant Conclusion (Parfit, p. 388)
- *The Impersonal Average Principle* (Parfit, p. 386).
 - This has its own problems (presented in lecture).